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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

GIFTS FROM THE TRIBE:
THE WRITING AND TEACHING OF FIVE CANADIAN AUTHORS

BY

LEAH CHERYL FOWLER

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
SPRING 1989

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Gifts from the Tribe: The Writing and Teaching of Five Canadian Authors submitted by Leah C. Fowler in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Secondary Education.

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Douglas Barbour

Date: February 20, 1989

Gifts from the Tribe:

The Writing and Teaching of Five Authors

is dedicated to the memory of

MARGARET LAURENCE

ABSTRACT

Gifts from the Tribe: The Writing and Teaching of Five Canadian Authors is an exploration of the writing and teaching ideas and practices of five Western Canadian published authors who teach writing. Five face-to-face interviews were held with Marsha Mildon, Rudy Wiebe, William Valgardson, Aritha van Herk, and Jane Rule.

A guide of 44 questions about writing and 33 questions about teaching writing was constructed and given to the writers in advance. The conversations were recorded, and the twenty-two hours of raw tape then were transcribed onto a computer. The responses of these "elders" of the teaching and writing tribe are described in this thesis.

The introductory chapter discusses the background to the study and current knowledge of writing and teaching writing processes. The body of the thesis contains the edited versions of the interviews with Mildon, Wiebe, Valgardson, van Herk, and Rule. The concluding chapter summarizes the dominant threads of their writing praxes regarding prewriting, drafting, revising, and polishing, and of their teaching praxes including establishing a writing setting, assigning work, and teaching writing in the classroom. This is followed by implications for the teaching of writing. The intent is that this study will provide useful and encouraging words for writers and teachers.

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The main acknowledgement goes to those five writing human beings who gave me non-renewable life minutes of writing time--Marsha Mildon, Aritha van Herk, William Valgardson, Rudy Wiebe, and Jane Rule. They inspire me to write and teach better by their literary work and by their own teaching.

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Gratitude is deeply felt for my family, and especially my Grandmother, for telling me the important human stories, and for Claire Kibbler and Colleen Novotny, for reading and for encouraging me to keep learning.

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Chapter One - Introduction

In conversation, in interviews, and in her novel The Diviners, Margaret Laurence often referred to "the writing tribe" in Canada. The "writing tribe" is a phrase that has provided a central metaphor for this thesis which attempts to discover what five "elders" have to say about writing and the teaching of writing. The five published authors whose words and ideas are represented here are members of two well-established tribes--writing and teaching. Both their own written works and their teaching are gifts to those respective tribes, and to the world.

The roots for this project are firmly grounded in three traditions: writing process, writing pedagogy, and author interviewing. Through my own processes of personal fiction writing, academic writing, and teaching writing for a decade, questions evolved for me about the nature of the relationship between writing process and writing pedagogy. As a result of reading The Paris Review interviews, and books by teachers who were also writers themselves, my search for more effective techniques in teaching writing appeared to lead more and more to examination of professional writers' practice. Researchers like Janet Emig were finding that what teachers had been telling students about how to write, in fact, had little resemblance to what "real" writers do in their studies and offices. Because Western Canada is blessed with some wonderful writers who also teach, it seemed appropriate and practical to ask these people what they do.

In the capacity of author/teacher there is a double wisdom. Because these five people interviewed are all authors of considerable reputation, their ability to create writing of excellent calibre is already established, and they are intimately familiar with writing as masters of the craft. Because they teach that craft to others (and have for many years), they can contribute knowledgeable insights about the ways teachers can empower students to be able to communicate with more fluent use of their language. With increased fluency there is the possibility to enhance the heuristic aspect of education (writers here report discovery as a main motivation in their writing). In *The Paris Review* interview series, author after author explains the element of discovery that occurs during writing, for example, reknowned authors like E. M. Forster say, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say"; John Dos Passos reports, "Curiosity urges you on--the driving force"; Bernard Malamud: "A writer has to surprise himself to be worth reading." Closer to home, authors like Margaret Laurence explain, "Each novel is a kind of voyage of discovery." In the interviews for this study, that experience of frequent discovery is borne out when, for example, Valgardson maintains that if you aren't writing to discover but just to confirm, you are writing a form of propaganda. Students need to be provided with a nurturing writing space, so that they, too, can experience discovery and can develop thought, meaning, and understanding through the act of regular composition in a number of rhetorical and expressive modes. The Chinese writer Zhang Xianliang (1988) writes in his novel Half of Man is Woman:

> I took up my pen again and tried to write. What appeared at the beginning was both contrived and obscure. I had to work on every character, like the ancients carving letters on bamboo strips. The drive-transmission between brain and fingers seemed to have rusted away. The words in my head could not easily be put down in writing. I would sit staring blankly, searching them out, one by one.
>
> Gradually, as a result of exercise, the gears began to mesh again. Strange characters once more began to seem familiar. When there is no one at all with whom one can speak one's mind freely, solitary writing becomes the most effective way of continuing to think. Once a concept in the cerebrum forms itself into words on paper...it takes on an independent and tangible existence. It leads you on to a new discovery, of its own accord, to the relationahip between that concept and others that are to come. Slowly, the ideas are linked and matched together, random and chaotic thoughts are sifted through an ordering process of reason. Even the ravings of madmen and the mutterings of a dream can be set in order by the magic arrangement of a pen.
>
> ...Being cast to the periphery of humanity is not necessarily all bad: one gains freedom of thought by it, and a certain purification of reason [through writing]. This purified reason is like a phosphorescent light--it can't open up a new road, but it can at least illuminate the road ahead. (p. 239)

The authors represented have taken personal and social responsibility to share this kind of wisdom of their writing and teaching, of the deep underground wells which are their sources for writing, of the "methods, metaphors, and maxims" (Bertoff, 1981) for writing. In this thesis they talk about the stories themselves, about making new stories to be handed down from generation to generation, and about teaching others how to do it. Writing teachers need to lead learning writers into this world of languaged story in order to contribute to the tribe and be supported by it as they mature into full-fledged members.

For one to discover advice about efficacy in written communication, published authors who also teach writing perhaps have the most direct link with how writing is made. They also have some suggestions for educating students toward a fuller personal literacy. The writers' words in this thesis are intended to be useful to teachers who write and to teachers who teach writing.

The correspondence between writing and learning is a close one arising out of a long tradition. The ancient Greeks wrote letters, dialogues, treatises, and meditations. Scribes were revered and usually found at the hub of philosophical, political, and ethical thought. One was considered to be uneducated unless one wrote, and wrote well. The same is certainly true today, and in an age of speed-of-light communication, writing becomes even more critical in the daily workings of the world, and for the furtherance of literature and the arts. In short, writing is at the core of the preservation of culture--past, present, and future.

Since the 1960's, there has been a rediscovery of the correlation between learning and writing, and of the importance of teaching writing as a process, as a primary means of helping students create a competent written product. That is, if a student is to be able to communicate in a literate fashion, given "normal" conditions, he must also learn the mode, the means, the medium: in short--the process. Because we all talk a communal language, we often assume that daily experience in communication automatically makes us adequate writers, but written usage of language is quite different from our ability to talk that language. For example, Vygotsky, writing in the 1930's, began to make it clear that writing is quite different from speech in both structure and mode of function. Speech and writing are not interchangeable. Janet Emig (1971) has written extensively about the differences between oral and written modes of communication. She states that writing is a learned behavior, artificial, slower, technological, whereas talking is not. But those very differences are what makes writing a unique and thoroughly effective mode of learning. Emig (1971) further explains that writing is a second-order process learned by formal systematic instruction. Its most significant aspects involve the fact that there are both origination and verbal construction graphically represented, which are not characteristic in such educational experiences as reading (Emig, pp. 34-37).

Successful learning is connective and selective; it is active, engaged, and personal (self-rhythmed) in representing and dealing with actuality. Jerome Bruner (1971) explains that good learning must be "enactive" (doing, using the hand); "iconic" (depicting an image, using the eye); and "representational" or symbolic (restatement in words, using the brain). Emig also rightfully points out that in writing all three ways of learning occur simultaneously. Writing is a readily available form and source of learning: it is integrative; it provides immediate feedback so both process and product happen concomitantly; it utilizes both hemispheres of the brain.

These conclusions are supported in the work of Donald Murray (1976, 1978) when he speaks of teachers attempting to teach writing composition in the way we were trained to teach literature: by autopsy! He writes:

> Most of us are trained as English teachers by studying a product: writing. Our critical skills are honed by examining literature, which is finished writing; language as it has been used by authors. And then, fully trained in the autopsy, we go out and are assigned to teach our students to write, to make language live...
>
> No matter how careful our criticisms, they do not help the student since when we teach composition we are not teaching a product, we are teaching a process. (Murray, 1976, p. 79)

Good writing process requires the establishment of systematic relationships which are elemental in thinking, communicating, expressing, problem-solving, decision making, and creating. "Clear writing by definition is that writing which signals without ambiguity the nature of conceptual relationships, whether they be coordinate, subordinate, superordinate, causal, or something other." (Emig, 1971)

Although McLuhan (1964) and his followers argued that writing is becoming obsolete because of the invention and proliferation of electronic media, most researchers such as Vygotsky, Graves, Murray, Emig, Shaunessey, Bertoff, D'Angelo, Elbow, Flower, Kinneavy, and Moffett are even more emphatic about the vital importance of writing as a way of learning and of deliberately structuring meaning.

This structuring of meaning in a holistic way is addressed by Polanyi in Personal Knowledge (1958) where he writes that "into every act of knowing there enters ~~a~~ compassionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known,...[this is] a vital component of his knowledge." Pirsig (1974) supports this opinion further with his statement that "the quality which creates the world emerges as a relationship between man and his experience. He is a participator in the creation of all things." (p. 17) Personal writing is a key mode for that kind of participation.

The writers interviewed in this thesis all talk about writing as a way "to put themselves in the world" (Mildon), as a way to "find out what I am thinking" (Rule, Mildon), as a way to "make sense of the world" (Valgardson, Mildon, van Herk). They all stress the importance of reading good literature, but they all state clearly that "the best way to learn writing is by writing" and that the act of writing itself teaches the writer.

Writing is an excellent way to learn about world and self, precisely because it is self-rhythmed, so that one can learn at one's own pace. Written speech represents a powerful instrument of thought (Emig, 1971, pp. 38-39). Britton (1970) also explains that writing as a mode is inherently more self-reliant than speaking. At a time in history when we need all human beings to be more self-reliant (there are not enough care-givers, police, guards, and monies for the troubled, dependent people now) we need to educate students to be more independent. If writing can provide that kind of learning and that kind of experience, then we need to encourage frequent writing and make it an integral part of our pedagogy and our students' school curriculum. As well, writing can be a "steady, graphic record of the journey of a complex evolutionary development of thought" (Emig, 1971, p. 39) as students progress through their education to prepare for the world in which they will live.

In her study "Components of the Composing Process Among Twelfth-Grade Writers" Emig (1971) provides evidence for the need for this thesis when she finds substantial inconsistencies between what established writers and good students do and what language textbooks and teachers say writers ought to do while involved in the composition process. Emig is quite severe in her admonitions about the "absence of match between what is taught and the practices of the best current writers." (p. 9) She attributes that gap to "teacher illiteracy." While that indictment may seem too harsh and while some of that "absence of match" between teaching and writing processes may have been addressed by changes in teacher education since 1969, there still appears to be a need for closer adherence of school writing to the actual practice of publishing authors.

The most crucial concern by Emig is that many teachers who teach writing in classrooms are not engaged in the writing process themselves. Because they do not write, Emig explains that they

> under-conceptualize and over-simplify the process of composing, ...they truncate the process of composing [so that little or no time or real attention is provided for pre-writing or for revision], ...much of the teaching of composition is abstract, ...and there is little evidence that the persistent pointing out of specific errors in students' themes leads to the elimination of these errors. (p. 14)

David Holbrook in his book The Secret Places (1965, p. 69) goes further in pointing out that such classroom practice can do damage to the students' ability to express themselves in written form:

> Children become so terrified of putting down a word misspelt, particularly an unfamiliar word, that they don't put down any words. I have seen it happen to a child of 8, who wrote long marvellous stories. After a year with a teacher who wrote `Please be more tidy', `Your spelling is awful', `Sloppy' --and never a good word, she stopped altogether. She wrote little lies, a sentence at a time, in a `diary'. `Coming to school today I saw an elephant.' It wasn't true. But that was all; she was damn-well going to write -- neat, complete, grammatical, well-spelt, short, and essentially illiterate lies. For her the word had been divorced from experience. The deeper effect is to make the learning process one separated from sympathy, and a creative collaborative interest in exploring the wonder of being.

There are practical measures that writing teachers can avail themselves of and the comments and suggestions of each of the writers in this thesis address those issues about which Holbrook and Emig wrote. They also provide information about how to deal with those challenges, privately at one's own writing desk as well as at one's students' writing desks.

> The more we become aware of the composing processes of professional writers, our students, and ourselves, the greater will be our opportunity to make our classrooms places where our students can engage in the discovery of their own thoughts. We need classrooms where teachers and students write together, talk together about their writing, and talk together about how they write. (Oster, 1981, p. 29)

Although Oster is referring to regular schooling and these authors are in a post-secondary setting, the writing process itself is consistent, regardessless of age, and applies to anyone atempting to write with competence. The responses of these five authors indicate that they already are doing things like that in their classrooms. For instance, Mildon explains that through freewriting in introductory college creative writing courses, students reduce can fear of writing. The formal teaching that does occur in the writing classes of Mildon, Wiebe, Valgardson, van Herk, and Rule, largely arises out of the students' own writing projects. Lectures are not abstract, context-poor, didactic talk. What is discussed in these classooms is based either on the students' own written texts they have brought to class or on what they may need to know about genre, style, or technique to compose a a piece they are working on.

Mildon, van Herk, Valgardson, Wiebe, and Rule also concur with Janet Emig that all writing teachers need to be avid readers of current fiction and regular writers. Being active readers and writers increases understanding of both the nature of what is being written and of what is being asked of students in English courses all over North America.

As students achieve personal literacy, learn the play and possibility of language at their disposal, and begin using writing abilities in living, the craft of the language also begins to provide pleasure and meaningful activity.

> There is a wonderful paradox underlying the writing-editing processes. The more one follows the rules, the more one's self is disclosed to the reader. The more one submits to "the language"--its codes, requirements, arbitrariness--the more invisible it becomes and the more visible becomes the presence of the writer. (Mandel, 1978)

The five writers in this thesis have all learned the rules and the language and have emerged as five personal voices and presences from whom we can learn. They are telling us here that

> a solution is available: to provide students with sufficient time to learn how to write by means of motivation, prevision [or "rehearsal" --Murray, 1984], writing practice, editing, and revision in response to correction, supported and reinforced by the tutorial composition conference. (Pierson, 1972, p.108)

In an impersonal world, we owe it to our students to teach them the skill, mode, craft, science, and art of writing that will sustain and delight them for a lifetime. It was with this concern in mind that I set about to explore what it was that practising writers who also taught writing did in their private workrooms, what they did in their classrooms, and whether or not the processes of those two endeavors overlapped.

Preparing for the Interviews

The impetus for this particular set of interviews occurred while studying research process and English curriculum, when I became aware that the area of most interest to me was writing. I had begun writing daily in the winter of 1985, three months after the death of my mentor-grandmother in October, 1984. About the same time, I also started reading interviews of authors in a systematic way. In addition to the seven books of _Paris Review_ conversations which seemed close to what I wanted to do, two collections of Australian writer interviews particularly caught my attention: _Yacker_ (Baker, 1986) and _Rooms of Their Own_ (Ellison, 1986). It also seemed that every issue of _Books in Canada_ or _Fireweed_ or _Canadian Fiction Magazine_ and other periodicals had pertinent conversations with favourite writers. But the real `eureka' for this project came from Margaret Laurence's phrase "Gifts from the Tribe" that I heard about almost incidentally. Some time was spent exploring that phrase as a fiction title but as a graduate student at the time, life and school began to overlap. I knew, though, that what writers did in writing workshops was quite different from what I and some of my colleagues were doing in our composition classrooms.

Having decided to do a thesis which involved interviewing authors, not only about how they themselves write, but about what they do in their classrooms with their writing students, I began to look for some practical information regarding writing pedagogy. Questions related to the teaching of writing process started to formulate in my mind and I sought the opinion and possible advice of various colleagues through a number of discussions. One of those people was Marsha Mildon, with whom I was teaching at that time, and we had a number of conversations about teaching writing. Mildon taught Creative Writing and Communications, a basic composition course, and I knew that she was a playwright who also wrote fiction daily. About the same time, discussions with other graduate students also ensued. I asked them what questions they would ask famous authors about teaching writing if they had the chance. Predictable queries about evaluation, assignments, and plagiarism emerged, but they also wondered about their composing process, revision practices, and the pedagogy involved. Notes and notes were kept from these discussions, readings, and ideas. Donald Murray (1978) and Peter Elbow (1981) made me aware of a kind of order in the writing process so under the rough mental headlines of prewriting, writing, rewriting, editing, and polishing, I developed a progressive set of questions which were intended to flow in order of actual stages of writing, and then a second set which dealt with the teaching of those stages.

The set of 44 writing questions (Appendix A) which I used as a guideline for each interview was designed to include both theoretical and practical aspects of process. The questions began with background experiences and personal context then moved to the prewriting activities of getting ideas, brainstorming or "spiderwebbing", using relaxation exercises, establishing atmospheres conducive for working, through to initial stages of freewriting, first drafting, and the later stages of editing, revising, polishing, and submitting of the writing for external approval in the public forum. The last few questions of the first set ask about the knowledge and reflections on writing that each author has come to over the years. The final selection and refinement of these questions was aided by closely studying the Paris Review interviews (Cowley 1957; Plimpton 1963), the two books of interviews with Australian writers (Baker 1986; Ellison 1986), several books of interviews with women writers and several books and periodicals of interviews with Canadian writers (Cameron 1973; Hancock 1987; Sproxton 1986).

The second set of 35 questions about teaching writing mirrored the order of the writing process as well, except that the focus was on the teaching praxis at each stage along the writing continuum. There were a few general questions included about plagiarism, student discipline, training of new writing teachers, and personal opinion regarding the functions of the writing teacher that, while not dealing with the writing process directly, do influence what goes on in a writing classroom. Many of these questions evolved as a result of my own teaching experiences and of the readings that appear in the bibliography.

In those questions, there were also larger and more philosophical issues I wanted to explore. How writers were educated, whether or not they were supported in their writing, what their views of writer and teacher roles in society were, what their personal metaphor for teaching was, why they taught, and why they write were other questions that arose. Refining of the questions took about three months, and I created them knowing that they would only serve as a guide for dialogue, leaving enough flexibility to ask about other things which emerged in the actual conversations.

Choosing The Authors

As core questions were being established, I began to imagine who might be willing to answer such inquiries. I decided to look locally for convenience sake and was pleased at the possibilities. I recalled the long and frequent conversations with my playwright colleague Mildon (who had just completed a novel) and asked her if she would take part in the study about writing and teaching of writing. She agreed readily and the dates in December of 1986 were confirmed.

The second person I contacted was Aritha van Herk who was a friend (met in Jacobean Drama and Shakespeare courses) and a well-established writer in Canada. Often I had spent weekends with her and her husband in Vancouver, sitting by the fire as she graded composition papers, long into the night, and was aware of her commitment to her students. At the time I wanted to begin the study, she had recently begun work in Creative Writing at the University of Calgary. When I sent her a letter of request for an interview, she replied promptly with a "yes" and after talking, arranged three days in February of 1987.

Encouraged by the willing participation, I grew bold and sent letters to Rudy Wiebe (whom I had met half a dozen times socially before) and to W.O. Mitchell (whom I have never met). I knew both of these men had taught and written for years, and were both well revered and quite different in their approaches to both literature and composition. Wiebe said he was interested in answering the teaching questions, but would rather omit the writing ones, since he was often asked the majority of those questions in other interview situations. I decided to go ahead with the interview even though it was for only the teaching part. W.O. Mitchell did not reply, although the double registered card never returned, so whether he actually received the request or not is unknown to me.

W.D. Valgardson and Jane Rule, neither of whom I had previously met, were chosen from British Columbia. W.D. Valgardson was Creative Writing Chairman at the University of Victoria at the time and I had just recently read his novel Gentle Sinners. I had also used his story "God Is Not a Fish Inspector" for years in my own classroom. In answer to my letter, he replied, "Sure, be glad to help out."

Jane Rule had recently been in Edmonton doing writing workshops, and a teacher I knew and a student of mine had both gone to work with her and praised her teaching ability in superlative terms. I knew her novels and essays well and knew her to be a succinct, moving, humane writer. With that in mind, I decided I would like to talk with her as well. To my surprise and delight, both Valgardson and Rule, two complete strangers, replied, "Yes," and their interviews were arranged five days apart so I would need to fly West only once.

The authors, then, that participated in the study are Marsha Mildon, Rudy Wiebe, Bill Valgardson, Aritha van Herk, and Jane Rule. In that order, they each have been accorded separate chapters wherein appear a short biography, the specific interview conditions, and the edited version of their responses to 44 writing questions and 33 teaching questions. The authors were given the questions in advance so they could think about and prepare what they wanted to say. Other questions which arose in the natural flow of the exchange were asked during the course of conversations. If they answered other questions out of turn, they were not re-asked. Consequently, identical order is not evident from interview to interview, but all the questions were ultimately dealt with directly or indirectly at some time during each of the five conversations.

There was a conscientious attempt on my part to keep a formal and non-intrusive stance during each interview, to allow maximum space and encouragement for the writers to say as much as they wished about the questions, which served to keep the talk fairly focussed. My main role seemed to be as a catalyst as the writers thought and spoke about writing and teaching. Before and after each encounter, I kept a journal which aided me in writing the interview conditions and in recording the context associated with each dialogue. Their biographies were compiled and condensed from the interviews themselves, from curricula vitae, and from other written sources.

Gathering the Data

The two sets of questions were included with my letter of request to each author for permission to interview. Six letters were sent; five writers responded and each of those five indicated a willingness to answer the questions, although Rudy Wiebe elected only to answer the questions about teaching since he had been interviewed about his writing process frequently and recently.

During each interview I used two tape recorders (one of them just for "back-up") and made no attempt to keep notes. This procedure allowed me to focus on the conversations between us, interjecting and asking additional questions that seemed appropriate within the context of the exchange.

After the interviews, I transcribed each author-set of cassette tapes via dictaphone onto computer discs (IBMpcjr). Given that I collected more than twenty-two hours of conversation, this alone was a substantial hurdle. These raw transcripts, while interesting for studying "in vivo" speech, were in need of editing for clarity, for pertinence to writing and teaching process, for correctness, and for general readability. I had not counted on the enthusiastic and voluminous response that I received, but although there was a great deal of work involved in this research, the results were very satisfying. Two readers gave valuable proofreading feedback in an attempt to locate errors and inconsistencies.

There were a number of editing "policies" that needed to be made. I had a deep sense of responsibility for accurately representing each writer's content and personal voice, while in the interests of readability, editing out the inevitable vagaries of spontaneous speech. Linguistic tags such as "uh", "um", "er", etcetera, were omitted along with repetitive, ideolectic phrases ("you know", "I think") used as pauses for thought in oral language usage. Where small ambiguities existed in the sounds on the tapes (caused by interference from airplanes, foghorns, telephones, feline battles, or clanking teapots), memory helped to reconstruct sentences within the context of the question asked. I took the liberty of bowdlerizing scatalogical and sexual expletives, and defamatory, personal comments about other writers in the interests of avoiding libel. I asked the authors if they wanted to see the drafts before the thesis was finished and they all said, "No." Once the interviews were transcribed and edited, I read them through while listening to the original tapes to ensure that all important points were retained, and divergences (interesting but tangential) were taken out for the purpose of the thesis.

These edited interviews constitute the main bulk of this work since the quality and extensiveness of thought and discussion by each author is better conveyed in their own words, than by formal summary of them. Their voices are strong and provide detailed information about their craft and their instruction of others in that craft. These are people whose life work is with words and the particular words they choose to discuss that work are essential to the understanding of their particular vision.

In the final chapter there is a brief summary of the authors' main ideas about the writing and teaching processes, which indicates areas of consensus and disagreement about writing and teaching, and a final section which draws some implications for writers and teachers. This last chapter is also intended as a guide for other teachers of writing to locate their own positions within the range of the views and opinions expressed by Mildon, Wiebe, Valgardson, van Herk, and Rule, and as a springboard for the development of other practices in their own writing and teaching.

The main miracle of this project remains with the five writers and their willingness to share their gifts so generously.

Chapter Two - Marsha Mildon

Marsha Mildon was born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1946 where her parents were university students. One of her earliest memories is of being taken to the McMaster University Library and told, "This is where you'll go when you grow up." She did indeed attend McMaster eighteen years later where she completed an Honours English degree, though in a rather start-and-stop fashion. Twelve years after that, she completed a Master's degree in Canadian literature at York University. Between these two major periods of academic study, she studied a wide variety of courses including economics, geography, photography, adult education, urban planning and social change in Scandinavia, and in 1976 and 1977, creative writing at the Banff School of Fine Arts.

Although she had written a great deal as a youngster, she did not begin to write seriously until she was 30, after a first career as a social activist. She began writing and publishing poetry in 1976 in literary journals such as *Dalhousie Review*, *Fiddlehead*, *Quarry*, and *Room of One's Own*. At the same time she supported herself by freelance writing educational materials for the general public in areas such as law and housing. Some of these publications included *Homelessness in Edmonton*, 1987; *Learning from Puppets*, 1981; *Planning and the Law*, 1981; and *Guide to Administrative Law*, 1977.

By 1979, she had moved from poetry to drama. Her poetic dramas *The Great Canadian Diamond Rush*, *North Pole Scrapbook*, and *The Nor'westers* were produced by CBC. She began writing for the stage, and her first full-length play, *Lightning Strike* was produced in 1984 by Workshop West in Edmonton. A second play *Painting D'Sonoqua* has been "workshopped" and Mildon is completing a commissioned, third play, *Trekking*, as this thesis is being completed.

Her formal teaching career began in Norway in 1971 teaching English as a second language, although she had done considerably less-formal teaching of such students as volunteers, co-op housing members, and prisoners, during her activist work. She continued teaching ESL until 1979 when she began teaching at Selkirk College in British Columbia. For five years after that, Mildon taught composition, creative writing, modern drama and Canadian drama at Grant MacEwan Community College. She is now writing full time.

Marsha Mildon Interviews

The first interview, about writing, took place on Thursday, December 4, 1986. It was a bitterly cold Edmonton day and we met at 5 p.m. at Sam's Broiler for a steak sandwich before walking across the street to Mildon's tiny one-room apartment. Two cats--Pisces and Yuri--were in attendance. The phone answering machine took care of all incoming calls.

The atmosphere was relaxed and the conversation proceeded at a leisurely rate, with the questions and responses leading naturally into one another. Although I taught with Marsha at Grant MacEwan College, there was a more formal tone to this discussion than other collegial ones I have had with her. Normally we do a lot of bantering back and forth, interrupting each other a great deal. Not that night.

Marsha's even, alto voice communicated not only information about the way she writes, but a deep love for language and the human act of writing. Her work is vitally important to her, as an unselfish and positive contribution to the world.

Our second conversation took place two days later--on Saturday, December 6, 1986. We enjoyed lunch at the Russian Tea Room on Jasper Avenue at 11 a.m. then returned, again to the living room, again on the sofa beside her desk. Because it was still bitter cold, Marsha moved her little blue truck so that I could plug in my car.

Marsha's ability to focus on the topic at hand allowed her to ignore overhead planes, cats holding Olympic wrestling, and neighbourhood sirens while she gave detailed accounts of what she does in her writing classrooms and why.

This time, in the fading afternoon winter light, a more reflective tone was heard in Marsha's cello-like intonations. The attention she gives to the needs of her students and her unconditional acceptance of human beings learning how to write was evident throughout the three hour interview.

Both interview sessions were exhausting--they were the first ones--and were also the longest of all the interviews. The results, however, of the six hours of conversation were exciting and gave me the courage and confidence to carry on with the other four interviews that were to follow.

Marsha Mildon   Writing Interview, December 4, 1986

LF: How long have you been writing and when did you first know that writing was more important than something that you did at school?

MM: It happened in two phases. First around 11 or 12, I was absolutely convinced that my destiny was to be a writer. I spent a great deal of time writing things, tapping stories out on Mother's old Underwood typewriter and sending them off to the Saturday Evening Post. They were all very nice and wrote me letters back, "keep writing." Later I simply stopped writing, at just about exactly the same time as I graduated with my B.A. from university. I didn't do any writing again until about eight or nine years later at which point I had an enormous sense of waiting for something to happen. What happened, in fact, was that I read Margaret Laurence's The Diviners, an astonishing reading of the book which took from eight in the morning until three in the afternoon in the bath tub. By the time I finished it, of course, like Morag, that was exactly I realized what my life was all about--writing.

That was about eleven years ago now. So when I talk about my serious writing, I have been doing it for about the last eleven years. In the interval between university and "the day with Margaret Laurence in the bath tub", I had been very much part of the social action, social development movement in Canada. I had been very involved and had reached a point of dissatisfaction with my role as an "animateur." That did not seem to be my forte at the time. So it was partly that dissatisfaction, but also it was very much my decision, that, yes, I was going to write, and I quite definitely decided at that point not to work as an active participant of that [social action] field.

LF: Did you get some encouragement from somebody to do that?

MM: My husband was very supportive. He said, "Fine, if you don't want to work, sure, stay home and write, no problem." For quite other reasons the marriage broke up later. Writing was also part of the mythology of the paternal side of my family. My paternal grandmother wrote things like epic poems about the founding of my family, and her four sons, including my father, were all absolutely convinced that they could be great writers, except they never quite got to it. They certainly encouraged all of their children to write, and my dad certainly encouraged me to write. The imaginative environment of my childhood was a wonderful one in that my mother says that she read me about two hundred stories by the time I was two years old, two hundred separate children's books.

Father always made up his stories, so my sort of pre-school environment was almost totally literary. There were stories and stories and stories and of course I was encouraged to make up my own stories too.

LF: And you did that orally, before you began to write?

MM: Yes, I did that both orally with my dad and for myself: I used to tell myself stories to go to sleep with. It was a sense of perhaps putting myself in the world. I was a sickly kid, with pneumonia, bronchitis, tonsilitis, and all of those things before I was five. I spent a lot of time in bed and wasn't a very active kid physically. Dad always told stories that included me as the heroine and we used to ride around on moonbeams and sunbeams. A lot of my personal experiencing with the world came from the stories, things I wasn't experiencing physically because I was sick in bed with the whatever. Now certainly it was clear that I was getting support. It was a time when I was together with Father or Mother.

I had, at an early age, an attachment to words. A couple of incidents come to mind. One, was the day I remember absolutely clearly, of finally figuring out that newspapers came in columns, not in words across the page, like in story books. I felt as though I had come upon one of the major secrets of the adult world. The other [incident] was having a book read to me about a little rabbit who ran away from home and having a sudden great enlightenment that that was what I could do. I spent all day drawing paper carrots and lettuces because that was what he had taken with him. I was taking paper carrots and lettuce with me, wrapping them up in my little bundle and going off like the rabbit. That was somehow some incredible enlightenment as to how to deal with my world. This was when I was four. I think in many ways the imagined world on paper, the world of words, was much more real to me as a preschooler than any sort of physical world that I might have been taking part in.

LF: Has that changed?

MM: [Laughter] Hm. In some ways it hasn't changed. The writing for me now is very much a way of participating in the world in ways that I know I wouldn't in a physical sense. But it enables me to participate in an imaginative sense.

LF: Why do you think that is?

MM: If you think about the sort of multiple personality that we all carry around with us--I am an amalgam of ten or twelve, or twenty or thirty, different personality potentials or possibilities, and a couple of those have become dominant in terms of my own way of being in the world.

LF: Do you mean that in a public sense, in that you have two or three public comfortable personas and the rest are more interior?

MM: Yes, there is a "public me" that I am comfortable with and that the world is comfortable with too. But there are many other me's that I enjoy exploring but I wouldn't particularly want to let loose on the real world.

LF: Did you discover those other parts of yourself in any way during your schooling, your formal education?

MM: I am not sure that I discovered much during my formal education.

LF: Can you talk a little about your formal education. Are there things you think might have contributed towards how you write now?

MM: I think so. Along about Grade XI, I had a teacher who encouraged me to write. She had a particular delight in Shakespearean sonnets and in order to please this teacher, become a favourite, I proceeded to write a considerable number of Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets. I think I wrote about ten, actually, in one year. And I think that there is a lot still in my language and in my ability to use language that stems from Shakespeare, particularly from that year of writing sonnets in good old iambic pentameter. It is a wonderful, wonderful rhythm for writing in. From Grade VII on, we read Shakespeare at school and that had a profound effect on my writing.

I also had a set of three geography teachers in high school who didn't teach me much about writing, but taught me a huge amount about how to think critically and how the world fit together out there.

I could look at the world with some critical faculties That helped immensely in all of my subsequent development.

I really did not much like university when I did my B.A. I liked a little about Anglo Saxon [literature] and about Milton, again as matters of rhythm of language, but I don't think of that part of my university career as adding very much.

LF: When you were in school it sounds like maybe you were more drawn to the poetic aspects of literature rather than prose or fiction. Is that accurate?

MM: Absolutely, I delighted in poetry and loved--ah, that's another thing. We did, much by my pleading with this same teacher who taught us the Shakespearean sonnets, some T.S. Eliot, the "Hollow Men", "Journey of the Magi", and so on. I loved poetry, particularly in high school. Again, I didn't particularly enjoy the way it was done at a university level.

LF: Because it was all a purely academic pursuit, or can you pin-point what it was about those classes that were off-putting?

MM: Because I think my high school English teachers were very good and had taught me a lot about analysis. I already knew the techniques of analysis, and that was all "the boys" were doing at university. They stood up and lectured away and told you what to think. By and large I found it incredibly boring.

LF: Have you taken any writing classes?

MM: Much later, after I had indeed decided that writing was going to be a serious thing for me. The following year I applied to the Banff School of Fine Arts and was accepted into their six-week summer course. (That would be in the summer of 1976.) I loved Banff, and returned in the summer of 1977 and took writing that year as well. A couple of years later they tried a pilot project, which was also a six-week period and I went to that as well, in October, November. The only other thing I did was a workshop on script writing with Chris Bruyere who wrote Walls.

LF: Can we go back to Banff? What things happened there for you?

MM: The first summer there was absolutely incredible for me. A number of things happened and it is in some ways harder to separate the personal from the writing. But whether one should or not, I mentioned before that my husband and I were breaking up so I arrived at Banff in a state of confusion and relative unhappiness.

Perhaps I should talk about the Banff process just a bit. It is a daily seminar of about three hours when the writers' material is read, and then the rest of the day is free for writing. With W. O. Mitchell at the helm, the primary technique is freewriting, so basically you had eighteen hours a day to freewrite, literally as long as you wanted, with the exception of the three hours when you came together. The dynamic of that particular year and group was that people became incredibly supportive of each other's writing. At first I would start to write a poem, write a line and then write the next line, until I got to the spot where something didn't work. Then I would have to take a clean sheet and start again at the top and write each line out neatly until I got to the spot where I'd stopped and think about it until I came up with the next words and so on. A ten-line poem would frequently take about thirty sheets of white paper with one line on each and be a week or two, or three, or more to write. At Banff I went from that careful word-by-word composing, to being able to sit down and write ten pages in a day. More than anything else it freed up my writing process incredibly and provided me with the first intimation from people who themselves wrote that I might indeed have some talent, that it just wasn't a dream in a little girl's head. I could be a writer.

LF: What about the teachers there?

MM: They were quite incredible. Sandra Jones a playwright from Calgary, and Ruth Fraser, the editor and book "rep" for McClelland and Stewart (now head of Film and Literary Arts Branch for Alberta Culture here), were mainstays for me through the whole thing. W.O. was there for three weeks. Eli Mandel was there for three weeks and taught me a great deal about poetry, about getting to the particular image and getting rid of all the baggage, clearing away the debris. Sylvia Fraser is the person I got to know best there (and with whom I continue a friendship, and who over the years has supported me). She taught me a lot about the psychological aspects of living as writer.

LF: What do you mean by that?

MM: She was the first person I ever met who seemed to know herself through and through and through, to the very depths, absolutely and honestly, and suggested to us at the Centre, through her interviews, but also later in my own conversation with her, that that kind of self-knowing is essential to a writer no matter how disturbing it may be, that you need to know yourself that well, to really survive as a writer in a sense. She was the first one who pointed out to me that times of severe depression were part of the creative cycle when your body-mind needed time to rest. You go into them [depressions], and if you didn't give up when you were there, you would come out with some renewed creative energy. She was able to identify things for me that I was beginning to go through that she had gone through, so knew that in fact they ended.

LF: Are there things that W.O. Mitchell helped you identify for yourself?

MM: I think probably the key from W.O. is his method of what he calls, "freefall", or "freewriting." He was my first introduction to it and to the absolute need to discover the mother lode of one's own material. He often used a mining metaphor--that freewriting was a matter of mining your material, and re-writing afterwards was the refining of that material. It was the business of looking for the sensuous, sensory detail that would create, to use his words, "the explosions of recognition in the reader." The reader would say, "Oh yeah, I know how that feels," and identify with it, but also bring her own experience to bear on what the writer has written. A lot of that came from W.O.

LF: To what extent do you use freewriting, or freefall in your writing?

MM: Constantly, for a number of reasons. I freewrite when I don't have time to actually sit down and work seriously on a project, just to keep in the habit of writing. I use freewriting as a kind of therapy, as a way to get feelings down that I don't have anywhere else. I use freewriting as a way to develop projects. In a sense, I go from freewriting, to re-writing when I am writing a project. I start off freewriting and don't really stop freewriting until I start re-writing. I use my own particular version of that all the time and have for just about every job, including for non-fiction things like Guide to Administrative

Law. I used freewriting a lot to organize that particular book. I used it for poetry, for drama, for fiction. What happened was W.O. provided me with the freefall metaphor. It gave me permission to write a lot more easily, a lot more freely.

LF: It gets you away from the difficulty of having writer's block at the beginning?

MM: Exactly. It gets away from the terror of the page. As long as you can tell yourself, "Oh, well, I am only freewriting" you don't have the super ego, or mother, or teacher, or editor, breathing down your neck, saying, "Now, now, that's not good enough." You can extend your writing a long way using that metaphor before you come back with the editorial re-writer.

A great deal of what I have learned about writing has come from Banff where I was catapulted into having to earn a living for myself. The friends I knew said, "Oh, well, you're a writer, why don't you write this and this and this?" Suddenly I found myself, by more luck than judgment, actually being a freelance writer for a living. Through that process of freelancing in non-fiction I learned a lot of things, mostly about discipline in writing. I developed more fluency with the tools of the trade--sentence structure, words and things...just the practice.

LF: And that's in whatever genre you ended up writing, even though you have said that your early and most comfortable genre was poetry?

MM: Absolutely. By design and desire my first writing was poetry, and I was quite convinced I would never write anything but poetry, except that by economic circumstances I started writing non-fiction, mostly legal "how to's." And then the poetry itself developed more and more into conversations between characters in the poetry. People kept saying, "This isn't poetry, Marsha, this is drama." I kept thinking, "Hm, I wonder." Eventually that was my rationale in taking Chris Bruyere's Script Writing course. Everybody kept saying my poetry was really drama and I didn't know anything at all about drama.

LF: Was that a comfortable genre?

MM: Absolutely. From almost the first morning in Chris' class there was an almost "deja vu/coming home" sense, like "aha, I know all about this" -- a kind of tacit knowing that I understood this form perfectly and could write it. I still feel that way most about drama, that I am most comfortable writing dialogue.

LF: You have said to me, from time to time, that you are a particularly oral person, rather than visual. How does that contribute to the drama writing?

MM: It contributes to that sense of dialogue. I have always had a very strong ear for anything spoken: the nuances, tones of voice, rhythms of voice. Indeed, at university it was one of my strengths that I could usually remember lectures word for word, if I actually listened to them. I can often do that with conversations. My real strength when I am writing drama is that I can write very natural sounding dialogue. I often know exactly how a person sounds, but have no notion of what they look like.

LF: When you are in the process of writing, do you have somebody that reads what you have written before it is a finished product?

MM: I have a friend with whom I trade writing on a regular basis. We do two things: we read the other person's material aloud, and we react on a feeling level as reader. I find it tremendously helpful to hear the words I have written from someone else's vocal intonations. It helps me know whether it is coming across, whether the rhythms are written into it, or whether they are still in my head. It helps me understand whether it's clear or not to them as a reader. It also feels like it is working if we laugh, or are touched by the writing. We don't get into interpretation or critical commenting, where you ought to change this or that. It is more a Peter Elbow style--pointing to what we remember, what makes sense, what works for us. That is incredibly helpful to me.

LF: Let's back up a little. Before you get to the process of having something to give to somebody to read, where do you get your ideas, your sense of inspiration, for projects?

MM: That seems to vary depending on the genre, although it's becoming a little more settled lately. When I was writing poetry, an image would arise in my mind.

I think the first poem I wrote, in this new serious writing, started while I was sitting in a canoe in the summer and a fall leaf fell down and landed on my shoulder. I can't remember the line now, but immediately a line of poetry came into my head. Poems start from that. Poems began to start in response to a character, someone I had heard or read about. I used to get a lot of ideas from CBC's "As It Happens". I would read about historical situations and then be fascinated by a character there, or by dialogue. One of my favourite poems started from my husband telling me about his grandparents and how they got along. I had a strong sense of their voices, although I had never actually heard them. Those voices stayed with me for about a year and a half before the poems turned up with those voices. My major work over the past five years--Lightning Strike--came as a result of my fascination with the historical figure of Mary Crawford, the woman involved with the first teachers' strike in Alberta, and I really wanted to write about her.

The novel that I have just finished came in the oddest way, with the name "Rotunda"--a full-blown character that just shot into my head when I was driving the Trans-Canada to Vancouver. I was particularly tired, but euphoric (it was the end of the teaching term) and bang, there was this character. About five hours later, her cohort the "Bun Witch" turned up in a restaurant and I knew instantly that these were characters in a novel.

LF: Do you have a sense of incubation time from the beginning of an image or idea before you actually write it down?

MM: What I seem to do is get an idea and think it's wonderful. I start freewriting it and then it doesn't work. I put it away and with one notable exception, the incubation averages about a four-or-five year period. That exception is the novel where the characters turned up the end of June and by August I was writing it, about issues of losing love and finding it (which I have been dealing with over the past eleven years). Although the characters were new, the actual material was quite ongoing.

LF: How do you actually transfer things from your mind to the page, turn thought into words?

MM: A variety of ways. I do keep a journal, often write things there, things I see or that intrigue me, things that raise questions. Usually they have to do with people--like the lady across the street one Sunday who appeared to be a perfectly good lady on her way to church. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, she rushed up a walk and sent a shopping cart flying down a driveway. She just pushed it off, slapped her hands, and went down to church. It was a vision out my window. I have no idea what I ever will do with that, but that kind of thing--the unexplainable and apparently unmotivated human behavior--is fascinating to me.

LF: So through the writing you discover the motivation?

MM: Yes, discover the meaning in the human action. When I start a project I simply sit down at the processor and start. "Okay, today I am going to write about Rotunda" and bang away on the typewriter writing whatever comes into my head about the character. That gets it down on the page. I also used to drive around in my car with a little cassette recorder, a kind of "freetalking" and then listened back and made notes. I make pretty extensive notes of ideas and plot things, even though I almost never use them.

LF: There's at least a "setting down" though--

MM: There's a setting down and then I proceed back to the typewriter again.

LF: What other tools of the trade or materials do you like to have besides the word processor?

MM: I'd be lost without the word processor now. I've had it for about five years now and it makes such a big difference. I'm not a very good typist and I get frustrated very easily with mechanical things. If I had to actually retype manuscripts I would be just horrified about it. I did for a while; it takes so much longer. With the word processor I rewrite a lot. Lightning Strike was rewritten about nineteen times and it quite simply would have taken me ten years to do it if I'd had a typewriter.

LF: But you still want a hard copy?

MM: Absolutely. I can't edit on screen. I'm not happy unless I can make my notes on the hard copy once I have it.

LF: Do you do some of your revision on your hard copy when you read first draft stuff and then later on when you retype?

MM: Yes, both. Another indispensable thing is my coffee cup, beside my word processor. I've tried using bulletin boards with the story line pegged up on it, but again, I spend lots of time pinning things up on it and then never looked at it. Basically, it's the word processor, the hard copy, and the coffee cup.

LF: What about things like reference books, or things you want at your disposal?

MM: I have a big Random House dictionary open all the time. I also have a thesaurus handy and when I am revising, I use that fairly often. I have a great desire to have an encyclopedia--I don't have one yet--so what I tend to do is phone the reference library. I could go on from there to say that I do a fair bit of research on things. I buy myself a university library card every year, and use it frequently.

LF: What about the physical environment you write in? Are there certain conditions you want, habits you have?

MM: Most of all I like to write in the morning. I am a very happy morning person. Put on the coffee, put out the cat food for the two cats who are purring and meowing for their breakfast, and make the instant breakfast, which the cats and I share. I get the coffee over to the word processor, generally without having spoken a word. I like to start working, with a silence of mind, if not a silence of actual not-speaking. I don't like to have to think about anything else in the world except the writing. I get up knowing I'm going to write and often will read the day's writing at night just before I go to bed, so it's clear in my mind when I start the next day. It's been run through my mind overnight. The other thing I often do is read the last bit, the last paragraph, or the last page of writing as I start, to get into the rhythm of the language. I often will read it aloud to myself. It's almost something I relate to with my arms and shoulders, a sort of muscular thing about the movement of language, which corresponds in a very physical way for me, to the movement of the body.

LF: Do you require a privacy then for your writing?

MM: Absolutely. I can freewrite in public, will freewrite during classes when my students are writing. But in terms of any serious writing, I need privacy.

LF: Is that a problem for you ever? Do people around you understand that fairly well by now?

MM: I live by myself for one thing. At six or seven in the morning there aren't a lot of visitors. The telephone answering service helps. The cats provide interruptions; the kitten especially comes and stomps on the keys of the word processor and makes all sorts of interesting things happen, but even then, I don't have to make a mental connection with the kitten. I just lift him very gently off the keys and proceed.

LF: Is it difficult to discipline yourself to write?

MM: I would say yes it's terribly difficult. When the alarm rings at six o'clock in the morning, dragging myself out of bed to get over to the word processor is sometimes terribly difficult. On the other hand, I would say I almost never discipline myself to write because when I am really writing, I'm so dead keen on what I'm doing, I write in every available minute. It never feels like discipline. "I 've got to finish such and such, because I want to know what happens." I'm a happy writer on the whole, not a "sturm and drang" kind of writer. If I'm writing well, I'm really enjoying it. If I'm not enjoying it, I am almost invariably writing really badly--or not writing at all.

LF: What things interfere the most for you, between you and word processor?

MM: Working for a living is number one. Sleep is number two. I teach full-time--five courses--and think I'm rather good at it, but it takes an enormous amount of time and energy. It really makes it hard to get up and do the writing.

LF: Are there things within your control that interfere?

MM: In a sense I could decide to work less and have less money. I am enjoying quite an upper, middle class lifestyle at the moment which I know I don't need. Right now I choose to work full-time and have all those "goodies."

LF: Is writing a kind of positive addiction for you? Do you get irritable if you don't write?

MM: I do. In some ways I think of myself as sort of first oral, then perhaps physical, and last a visual person in that I get almost a sense of physical explosiveness about myself. Sometimes I get a peculiar headache across the back of my head. (With falsetto)--"Oh no--it's that headache again." Also a feeling of displacement.

I often use the old phrase "I'm beside myself." That often is how I feel when I am not writing. It's very much a centering activity for me. When I am writing I am also most myself. Being away from that leaves me more vulnerable to outside things. The writing centers me in my internal self. Especially with teaching, and knowing people, and living in an urban center, if I'm not writing, there's so much input, so much stimulus from outside, that I feel cacophonous and fragmented when I'm not writing.

LF: What's that physical writing process like for you?

MM: It's very intense; it's somewhat like scuba diving in that it's one of the few times in my life when body and mind seem to be working together and there is nothing outside. I'm not thinking about one thing and doing another. Everything's doing the same thing. In some ways I can compare it to the sort of intensity and release of a sexual experience. Very sort of uptight, energized and then a sort of sudden release as the writing works. Writing is a very physical activity for me, even though the actual fingers on a word processor is not very physical. People have watched me write and say I make faces and talk to myself all the time too, although I'm not conscious of that at all.

LF: Are you ever afraid to write anything? Have you had that experience of freezing, blocking, or censoring?

MM: I've had the experience of censoring particular bits and pieces, yes, things that might hurt other people, particularly family. For instance, having fathers as characters who have attitudes that my mother may have had, so as not to offend or hurt one or other.

LF: In those circumstances, how do you maintain an authentic voice?

MM: The authenticity is the emotional and human content, not the physical detail.

LF: Do you ever worry about the consequences of something you write, either for yourself or for others?

MM: Yes. When I was writing Lightning Strike, it was interesting for me because it was an historical incident. There was the question of historical authenticity both to incidents and to what a thirty-year-old teacher, female, unmarried, in 1921 would think and how she would behave. I couldn't care less about the historical detail and indeed inserted and took apart and merged and changed and added historical detail. Mary Crawford was a woman of extremely strong conviction and emotion from whatever I could tell. What I was concerned about was to create a play which would accurately present her position in the world if she were in the world today. A play that I felt confident would say to the world today what Mary would have said in 1921.

When I was writing poetry I used to talk about trying to capture the poetry of the individual's voice. A poetry that the "common man" (if you will) in today's society has lost, because poetry has been captured by the academics and hauled off to universities. And so, all the rest of us poor buggers don't have any poetry left to us, except you go into the bar or out on the street--anytime a human being starts speaking with passion, or something they care about, you have poetry, and you hear them suddenly leaping into a different sort of language, an impassioned poetic language. As poet I wanted to capture those authentic voices, to present the authenticity of what it is to be human right now.

LF: Do you experience a kind of fine line of ecstasy/terror connected with writing? Can you describe points of ecstasy or apprehension while writing?

MM: There's a certain, quite complete ecstasy when it is going well and you are writing as fast as you can. People have certainly described it as a trance state and I would say that's a pretty accurate description because everything is unified. There is also, ever-present, the terror of failing and that's both a private and a public terror. There is the private terror of failing in your own eyes.

LF: Not being able to express as you want?

MM: Yes, and the public terror of not being published or being reviewed critically or being seen in the public eye to be a fool.

LF: At what stage do you think of audience?

MM: I think of audience in a general way all the time, usually as a single reader or viewer. I imagine the kind of audience when I am rewriting.

LF: Do you have a set plan for doing your drafts?

MM: It varies from project to project. I will decide the second draft is for looking at the main character. Is the character's voice coming across? What are the incidents that work, that the character is involved in? On Lightning Strike, for example, I worked one character at a time, per draft. Of course it's not that discrete because as soon as one person says something, then everybody else for the next page and a half has to say something different. It's never quite that simple. I start out with that kind of a plan and I read in-between. I rewrite and then read the full copy and make notes. I do rewrite in a fairly rational way by planning quite precisely what I'm going to do each time.

LF: Do surprises come for you during the rewriting?

MM: Yes. Surprises come all the way through.

LF: How do you know when a piece of writing is finished, at the point you will release it for public scrutiny?

MM: Isn't it W.H. Auden who says "a poem is never finished, it's only abandoned?"

LF: When do you abandon yours?

MM: With poetry, I begin to get this feeling in my stomach--a kind of excited-kid-at-the-fair-and-you've-had-too-much-candy-floss-throwing-up feeling. With prose and drama, it's a little more complex than that. It gets to the point where I feel as though I've said everything I can say at this point.

LF: When a piece of writing is done, do you have other people you rely on between you and publisher?

MM: No, I don't have an agent or editor. I just pack it up in an envelope and send it off.

LF: And how does that feel?

MM: Traumatic. Separation anxiety hangs on for days or weeks. I feel a little bit like seeing a well-brought-up child get married. You know you've done everything you can, and you know it's a joyous occasion, but you're not absolutely certain it's going to work.

LF: In what ways do you evaluate your own writing?

MM: It's a largely intuitive thing of whether I feel a kind of emotional attachment to it almost. I don't often read material right after I've finished it, because I tend to dislike it intensely. When I'm starting a piece, I always have a tremendous sense of optimism, that "Ah this time I'm finally going to say it." Then there's a point, during the rewriting where I hit bottom and think "not only is this not going to say `it'; it's not going to say anything." The mental perfect saying of it `this time' is never achievable really. So, you have wonderful mental moment or moments, or weeks of inspiration, after which you realize once again that writing is human, and thus fallible, activity. Then you come to some compromise between the depths of depression and the heights of inspiration.

LF: But perhaps that's a blessing, don't you think, because if you ever got to the stage where you felt like you've said "it", then there would be no more writing required?

MM: That's true, and I think actually that's happened to some people. I seem to remember a quote from Sheila Watson, having written The Double Hook and people asking her, "Well, why didn't you write more?" She'd reply, "I said what I had to say." I think you're right; if you do actually succeed in saying "it", then perhaps you do stop writing.

LF: Do you have a favourite work that says what you intended or that you feel very pleased about and would call your best work?

MM: There's one particular poem, mentioned before, a dialogue between an old man and an old woman, that is probably my all time favourite poem and comes closest to the inspiration I had initially.

LF: What about a worst product?

MM: [Laughter.] I have a worst published--I called it "Fragments of a Treaty Forever" in the style of modernist American poets. A collage of bits of Indian Treaties, bits of dialogue, bits of poetry, all stuck together to tell the story of one young Indian girl. From the time I saw it published, I knew that it was a singularly simplistic and one-sided view of a very complicated human issue. It's an almost teenage view in the sense of its one-sidedness.

LF: And what about the one not published? Do you consider it "thrown away"?

MM: I don't throw away stuff. I think it's W.O. who says that you never know when you'll find a line in something that you can use for something else. It's stuff that I just haven't quite figured out what to do with yet. I talked about the four-to-five year incubation period. All of the other things in my drawer are things I have a sense I will come back to.

LF: So they are a collection of possible resource materials?

MM: Yes, and of ideas I want to work out, but I'm not sure how.

LF: Do you include a social or political intent somewhere in your writing?

MM: Yes. I think that most people do things, identify themselves, live in the world, not in any relationship you could define as concrete reality, but in relationship to the stories they tell themselves, and that inasmuch as we can change the stories that people tell themselves about the world, we can make major changes and social progress. For instance, there is a story abroad that the Russians are enemies of the Americans and are out to turn the Americans all into little communists, and will do so if they're not stopped at the door by atomic weapons. I think we can rewrite that story--because I don't suppose for a second that it has the slightest bit of accuracy in a real-world way.

LF: Marshall McLuhan talks of writers and artists being the only ones really living in the present, and that society in its present, lives in the immediate past. The extrapolation of that then is that the job of writer is perhaps to write the present (and the possibilities of the present at any given time) which will be, for society, its future; a writer's work is to give new stories that help people with the future. Do you agree with that?

MM: Yes, in the sense of trying to get as close to the absolute nub of the present--and I'll give you an example. In the novel I have just written, there's a scene where the heroine, Rotunda, is in the supermarket and has a temporary, ambulatory nervous breakdown; she just can't cope with all the stuff on the shelves.

LF: Toffler's "overchoice"?

MM: Yes. We have a story abroad in our society that supermarkets and lots of choice, the variety that the market economy brings for us, is a super kind of individual freedom. What I see when I go to the supermarket is people in terrible distress trying to deal with this market economy that they're faced with. So, while I didn't sit down for a second and think, "Well, now, Rotunda's going to be a symbol of the modern overwhelmed consumer," it does seem to me that I got through right then to something that is very real about the present for a whole lot of people. If they can see their reality reflected in a story, then they can maybe say, "Hey wait a minute, that is what's happening to me. I don't want that to happen," and do something about it. But until they see it articulated externally--

LF: You're talking about making conscious for reader some of the things that are unconsoious?

MM: Yes, or some of the things that they are afraid to admit. It's really embarrassing to say to people that you're afraid to go to the supermarket. People think you're a nut, an agoraphobic at the very least. But I think there are probably huge numbers of people who have momentary panic attacks in supermarkets, but don't admit to it because they believe no one else does. So if we make that a possibility through our story telling, then maybe they can accept it, and from there, do something about it.

LF: Are there other stories that you know you want to tell?

MM: Yes, although not that clearly. I don't often know "the story" beforehand.

LF: But you have a budding project?

MM: Yes, I have some budding projects. I have some budding characters. I have several of those at the moment.

LF: At one time for different pieces?

MM: Yeah, a bunch of different possible projects in my head and this filing cabinet full of old projects that are still waiting for their moment to be written.

LF: In the prewriting phase, then, you are quite comfortable having more than one set of ideas going on at once, but what about in the writing phase? Do you work on more than one project at a time?

MM: Almost never. I find that terribly difficult. I find it even difficult to work at the job of teaching and the job of writing at the same time. To have more than one project--I will occasionally write a poem, a sort of inspired poem, while I'm writing other stuff, but certainly I don't recall ever having more than one major project active at a particular moment.

LF: Why do you write?

MM: Part of it is this personal pressure, the "writing headache" as I said. It's partly goes back to what I was saying about my childhood about my way of existing in the world. Ultimately I write to communicate with the other. I laugh sometimes because I find myself saying about myself in many different situations, social and otherwise, that if I could just "explain" myself, everything would be fine. I think a huge reason for my writing is to explain myself, perhaps to myself. Explaining, discovering, inventing myself.

LF: But also as a way of connecting?

MM: Yes, absolutely. I have nightmares about being in a crowd of people and my mouth moving and forming words but no sound coming out. That sense of not being able to communicate is a personal terror of mine and the writing is a bulwark against that terror.

LF: How much of your own life experience, of your own life biography, do you borrow from? How much do you think that influences you?

MM: Hugely. If you include all my reading and my experiences as part of my biography--I mean I have one set of eyes and they are attached to one brain. Everything comes from biography. But in a more direct way, I plagiarize my life liberally for material. Again, what I'm concerned with is the detail of authenticity but the emotional authenticity for my characters. One of the things that helped me quite a lot actually was reading some of Stanislavsky's stuff about actors and how they get into a part. In a way I've used that as a way of me as writer mentally getting into a part, into a character. I think all of my characters--

LF: You put on that consciousness, so to speak, for the time while you're creating?

MM: Yes. They all come from me and yet I also grow into them. While they're taking bits of my life to grow theirs, I also become more like them in a funny kind of way by the time I've finished. But still they are other and I have a strong sense of them being somewhere outside. But details of my life I use all the time if they're useful.

LF: You talk about trying to achieve an emotional authenticity. Can you think of emotions like a sense of alienation or pain or struggle or anger, or even just sensitivity in general? In what ways do those things influence your writing life?

MM: Do you mean my own personal senses of pain and alienation?

LF: Yes.

MM: They're part of it. I think the alienation goes back to what I was saying about my reason for writing, the connecting it provides. It makes the possibility of a connection that might otherwise not be there.

LF: So that you're never lonely while you're writing?

MM: That's right. You people your world. I wallpaper my world with characters, thank you very much, and it's quite crowded in here. I've certainly felt the other emotions and used them as part of the writing. Sometimes they've powered the writing, but I think more, they power the freewriting and then become artistically formed in the rewriting. In the rewriting, I'm a step or so removed--well, I'm not sure that's true. I cry when I write sad things and laugh when I write happy things. I'm certainly emotionally connected to the writing.

LF: So you really do recreate those feelings as you write?

MM: I'd say I intensify them. My perception of my public persona is one who takes the in media res, the middle way, and never gets too joyous nor too pained, but takes everything, controls things reasonably well. My characters, and myself as writer of those characters, experience the extremes of those emotions. Where I may have felt a little pain in a circumstance, if I'm using that pain in writing about a character, that character may feel the full shot of pain that was potential in the original incident.

LF: Is it a way of seeing the limits or edges of those feelings?

MM: Yes, it's a way of exploring the fullest dimensions of humanness, and that includes the fullest range of emotions.

LF: I wonder if we can talk for a few minutes about the whole business of love. If one is loved and accepted in a kind of unconditional way, do you think that that creates a kind of psychological freedom and safety that is necessary for creativity?

MM: Yes I do. When I was at Banff the first year, I was separating from my husband and I did some writing about that; it was quite funny, put the whole thing into a humourous perspective. That was one of the things of mine that Sylvia Fraser read. She came back to me afterwards and said, "You've dealt with this really well and you're getting to the very core of the emotions, of the painful emotions. You may find tenderness much more difficult to express." That comment stayed with me until I experienced that kind of unconditional love. Although I was writing and creative up until then, the sense of joy with which I was able to write, to create, was much different, much tamer. The extent to which I am now free and freed to let the mind soar and explore the real dimensions of humanity and be as funny or as tender or as profound or as pained as I can be at any one moment has changed absolutely dramatically.

LF: You have a sense of confidence that you didn't have before, a degree of safety to be able to take some risks?

MM: Absolutely. The risks hardly seem like risks. They're more like enjoyable explorations because the home base is there. The centre of my world is solid so I can orbit as far as I want. The gravity is there.

LF: Can we go back to the business of authenticity and of a realness in writing. Very often people ask fiction writers if a thing really happened or how much of a piece is real. What do you think they're tacitly asking about? Why are readers concerned about truthfulness in fiction?

MM: I think it goes back to my comments about the supermarket. If you read about something and someone else has done it or been there, then it's all right to do it, to admit it, to allow yourself that possibility if it's "real". But if someone has just made it up--when we talk about myths in this country at this time, we talk about them as if they were untrue. Whereas the whole notion of myth that I understand is stories that tell the ultimate truths. We've devalued the whole notion of ultimate truth, partly because of the nineteenth century scientific man theories that you can go out and pour two things into a test tube and come out with "truth" because you've experimented. You've seen it there. It seems to me, frankly, that quantum physics is as much a myth as seven days out of clay, or the moon is in love with the sun, as an explanation of how the world works and how we exist inside it. Quantum mechanics is no more "real" to me than Biblical or Greek myths of creation, but they are all explanations of how we exist. I think what people are desperately looking for, especially now because so many of the myths have been devalued, is stories that have some core of something they can hang on to.

LF: You're saying that for you as writer your connection or your relationship with truth in your fiction writing, or any writing I suppose, has to do with keeping a human truth rather than the physical truth, an accurate reflection of how people know and feel and are.

MM: Yes. I was very much moved once when a Roman Catholic priest explained the incarnation as being God saying "the way is humanness." When Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," what he was really saying was that to be as human as possible is the way. It seems to me that "way"involves loving and finding meaning in Frankl's sense of work and suffering and love, that is the essence of humanness, and as writer, my task is to create stories of humanness that people can identify with and so explore and expand their own humanity.

LF: When you tell stories and attempt to incorporate those kinds of truths, do you have a sense of a particular writing voice that you do that in?

MM: Yes and no. Through my poetry and through my play Lightning Strike what I was experimenting with largely were other people's voices, recording, transcribing, creating them accurately. Finding my own voice has been a very slow process, partly because I was afraid to speak in my own voice, so perhaps most closely in the novel I've just finished I've come to a voice which is recognizably mine even though the characters have their own voices. That's the strongest sense I've had of that.

LF: Do you think that voice is more and more recognizable as your own--do you think that is what style is?

MM: I think voice is bigger than style. Style, I think of as how you say something. Voice, I think of as what you say as well as how. I sometimes say to classes, "You've got just two things as a writer, word order and word choice. That's your whole shot." When I think of style that's what I think of: word order and word choice. When I think of voice, I think of something larger, more intangible.

LF: I want to connect the seeing or knowing, observing, that informs the voice, whether it's during the writing or before the writing. Is that informing to the voice a very layered thing? When you see the world are you conscious of layers of context that are available to your writing voice? Are you aware of inventing metaphors?

MM: That's interesting given our discussion up to now because I think that enlightens me a bit. My perceptions of the world on a day-to-day basis as person or writer or human being are largely awfully scrambled. I don't seem to have a very good censor. There don't seem to be many things that I block out. I perceive constantly to an almost painful level, a constant barrage of perceptions and not in any patterned way. There's a chaos of external stimuli. In the writing I pattern those perceptions, and then I discover layers in those patterns. The layering metaphor is a process of discovery after the fact.

LF: You've talked about discovering things in writing. Is writing a way of solving problems for you?

MM: Not solving exactly, but discovering. I don't set out to solve problems in writing, but I'm forever taking a look at a piece of work after it's come to closure and discovering that in there is a pattern or problem that I've been struggling with in action. It seems like the subconscious presents this stuff and one deals with it in a creative way, and incidentally, the discoveries come your way. I often find in poetry that the poems I am fondest of are the ones in which I discovered something, but the poems that other people are fondest of are the more deliberate, structured poems where I did the discovering first and re-created it in the poem.

LF: What functions and responsibilities do you believe a writer has to her society?

MM: I think that one has an obligation as a writer or anyone who, as any kind of artist, as any kind of creator, to create as close to the authenticity, to the truth as one possibly can. To lie with your words--for instance, I've had job offers to work for government and have refused them, not because I think governments always lie, but because the particular governments where I was asked were governments with whom I profoundly disagreed. I feel as though if you lie with your words, ultimately, they will dry up. You'll cease to be able to communicate at all if you lie with your words. The writer has a responsibility to be as authentic, as whole as possible, to speak what you see. I think you also have a responsibility to try to understand the world in all its complexity, to look at the major issues like survival of the species and all the other species that we're killing off.

LF: You're talking about moral and ethical responsibility?

MM: I guess I think we all have a profoundly moral and ethical responsibility for the future of the world, writers as well as other people. But writers have the possibility to move and touch a large number of people through their work. That's an awesome responsibility.

LF: In your connections with other writers do you feel like that's a shared consciousness? Do you have a sense of being a part of a writer collective in society?

MM: I don't have a lot of literary connections, though I know a lot of people. In daily life, my connections with teaching people and social action, political people are much closer.

LF: What about connections in terms of organizations such as the Alberta Writers' Guild or Canadian Playwrights Union?

MM: Yes, I'm a member of those. Those are largely memberships of convenience for me. They send me magazines and tell me markets. My connections are with people who are active in the community as opposed to writers who tend to be more active in their rooms with their typewriters.

LF: So your network of people around you are not other writers?

MM: No. Very few actually.

LF: So you bring varied points of view to your connections?

MM: Yes, and try to reflect those other voices in my writing.

LF: Are there particular writers to whom you feel some gratitude or debt?

MM: For their writing?

LF: For their writing. For their work.

MM: Margaret Laurence, in a most profound way. One of the first times I ever had a sense of my world making sense, because I saw it objectively in someone else's writing, was when I read Diviners, and then subsequently read her other books.

LF: I understand you went to see her?

MM: Yes, I did. It was very much a kind of personal pilgrimage. It was when I had just started writing seriously and I desperately wanted to go. Actually, someone else who was involved with theatre had suggested that if Laurence were an actress, you'd go backstage to thank her for the Diviners. We concocted this scheme to go and visit her. Ultimately, this other person never did, but I did go. It was a wonderfully sort of picaresque approach. I had a housing meeting in Toronto, so I flew from Thunder Bay to Toronto, and then with the last of my funds I took the bus from Toronto to Peterborough because I knew she was out in Lakefield. Sure enough, her number was in the phone book and I phoned and she said, "Yes, come on out tomorrow." Since I had no money and it was miles out in the country, I rented a bicycle and bought a little chunk of cheese which by then was absolutely all I could afford, and bicycled out to this cabin. Then I spent the afternoon sitting in awe of her, trying to ask intelligent questions, but not particularly able to. I felt so indebted to her for being in her presence and being able to know that this real human being had written this book, and it's wonderful, and maybe I have some hope of doing something like it some day. She talked very generously about writing, about living as she did by the river there. A very welcoming, hospitable person. A very good experience.

LF: Are there others?

MM: I've mentioned Sylvia Fraser several times. I certainly owe a debt to her, and all the Banff people. W. O. Mitchell, of course, made a huge difference in really challenging me to risk and move beyond the little ten line poems I was writing. Lawrence Durrell of The Alexandria Quartet in terms of some of the loveliest prose I've ever read. Not that I want to emulate him, but simply for letting it exist for me to read. Those would be the major ones. I've had lots of literary influences. William Carlos Williams influenced my poetry for years after I studied his work. Eli Mandel's a brilliant writer and teacher.

LF: Are there any other comments you would like to include?

MM: Not really. It's interesting in Diviners, Morag says that she used to believe words could do magic, but now she knows it is only occasional. I guess I don't believe words can do magic anymore, but I always think of George Steiner's article about man as the "language animal". He talks about us identifying ourselves, coming face to face with identity through language. That's ultimately what I think of as the primary business of the writer: to identify us, what it is to be us in the world.

Marsha Mildon Teaching Interview December 6, 1986

LF: What kind of teaching experience do you have?

MM: Basically three types. I teach creative writing, composition, and freelance teaching. I have done a number of writing workshops in private organizations, private businesses, and a few in government. I haven't taught in the school system--just at the college level and at workshops with professionals: lawyers, social workers, business people.

LF: In your college classes, how many of your students are in your classes because they choose to be there, and how many are in compulsory courses?

MM: Communications is a compulsory course, although a few of them, maybe two per cent, would choose to be there. In Creative Writing they're all there by choice.

LF: What is the average class size that you teach?

MM: About 25 and I'm quite happy with that size. If it gets bigger than 25 it's unwieldy. I've had numbers from six up. Ideally, I like between 15 and 20. It's enough people to respond to things that you can get a good discussion going and at the same time, you can give each student a decent amount of individual response.

LF: Have you found much difference between the teaching of the creative writing and the compulsory courses where they are doing composition?

MM: Yes, a difference in their attitude, at least in the beginning of the term. There is a certain level of hostility in compulsory courses and even more fear--terror that they're not going to pass the course and they're not going on to their other courses because they can't do this one. In the creative writing course, they are all keen to learn something about creative writing. There still may be a bit of fear that they are going to discover they are not as talented as they think. But, it is a much more optimistic starting point.

LF: What efforts do you make at the beginning of the course to establish a kind of psychological safety and freedom for the students to help get rid of some of that fear and anxiety?

MM: I think that the very most important thing in writing is to create that psychological safety. First of all, I start all of my classes with freewriting kinds of exercises which are less fear-creating. You can write whatever and however you want without fear of judging. I also talk a good deal about my own approach to writing and the writing class. I talk about it being a place to find out what works in our own writing and make it clear that I am not into public negative criticism. In my individual responses to their papers, I rarely use strictly negative criticism. The thing that creates the psychological freedom most is the first assignment. Invariably, it's done very tentatively. People sort of stick out antennae here and there, but really drawing back and being very, very careful. So, I am exceedingly thoughtful about my responses on those first papers. It takes me absolutely hours to mark first papers. After I do that and they realize that indeed they are getting honest responses that aren't going to cut apart, then there is an immediate relaxation, in either kind of class.

LF: Are there other deliberate things you do in your teaching to create a particular atmosphere?

MM: I use music, very relaxing flute tapes that I play throughout the class. I put them on when I come in about five minutes before class and leave them on until the end. The feedback I've gotten has been that it does relax people. I also do some deliberate relaxation exercises early on in term. I'll have everyone close their eyes and get them to do some positive imaging (Find the most comfortable place you know--at home, watching the waves--and listen to the music.) I give them some deep breathing instructions and often we go through a tensing and relaxing of each of the muscle groups. When we finish that I usually do an introduction to their first in-class writing. I ask them to get out their papers and pens first, do the relaxation exercises and then at the end I say, "Okay, quietly come out of it and start writing."

LF: How long does that take?

MM: About ten minutes.

LF: Have you always done that?

MM: No, I have moved towards it over the past five years. I started doing the relaxation to get people ready to do oral exercise where the level of fear becomes almost phobic. I also became more and more convinced that it was useful in general. I have done a lot of reading over the past two or three years, and the more I read, the more convinced I am that the state of relaxed, open receptivity is the critical one for learning and for creativity. Unless you can create that for starters, the rest of what you do in class may be for nought. Because the mind is seized up, the muscles are seized up and they're just not with you. They spend all their energy being "hyper" and nervous and scared and otherwise occupied.

LF: Do you have rules in your writing classes?

MM: Yes, and they're quite clearly stated. One of them is that students do not negatively criticize other people's work. I read their work aloud and we discuss it--what works, what they remember, what had a particular significance for them. The second rule is that during the writing time in class there is absolute silence. Third, if I give people an hour to write they don't decide they're finished at 45 minutes and leave. They write for the full hour.

LF: You mentioned in the first interview that you require privacy for your own writing. If you have students writing in the classroom, how do you get around the issue of privacy?

MM: Partly by the initial relaxation exercise in that they can sort of image themselves into their private space and create a mental space around them. I also attempt to keep perfect silence in the room. On occasion I have had students come up to me and say, "Gee, I just can't work like this" and some students do in fact go off to find themselves a private space. I don't encourage that--but for those for whom it's a real issue I just let them go.

LF: Do they hand the in-class freewriting directly to you?

MM: Yes. On the whole people are not particularly experienced in creative writing when they come into it. Interested, yes; experienced, no. I start on the basis that they are all at a pretty introductory level and that the most critical thing is to foster their own creative process. From some of the studying I've been doing, it seems as though the creative process takes place in about four stages. There is a period of intense or focussed work that may or may not be successful.

Then there is frustration that this isn't working. At this point people go off and stop thinking about it, do something else. Turn and look at the fire, go to sleep, walk the dog, go to the pub. All those things have been mentioned by writers and scientists. During that relaxation period, there is an "Ah-haa" moment, then an inspiration happens--a coming together, the bolt out of the blue, "Eureka," the "now I know what I'm going to do." Finally there is another period of work when you refine, put into practice the results of the "ah-haa." I start off class by reading their work and we discuss what is working. Then, I have a design for each particular class and I will draw out some bit from the read work about character development, for example. That takes about an hour.

Then I spend 15-20 minutes in a formal lecture pulling together what we talked about and organizing the material. Those first two periods of work I think of as concerted work. Then I tell them that after the break they're going to do some character development themselves and I send them out. That is a quite deliberate scheduling-in of the relaxation period in the creative process. When they go off they talk to one another. Very often they will come back from the break and say, "I figured out exactly what I am going to do about this character development." They will sit down, start to write, and about two minutes later they'll need to go to the washroom. They'll come back in about five minutes and just tear into their writing. It seems almost as though they require that physical action of walking around the college to move them along in the creative process. I do try to simulate the phases of the creative writing process in the classroom.

LF: Do you see that cycle from work, to frustration, to relaxed space, to "ah-haa," back to concentrated work in a kind of continuous spiraling cycle? The creative process is recursive?

MM: Yes. When I am working well and continually, the cycles deepen and deepen. I get to deeper layers of my material, deeper layers of my unconscious. For some of the students I think that happens too. They continue their writing outside the classroom, and so over the course of the term, they get deeper and deeper into their own material. That's certainly what I hope happens.

LF: Do you spend time talking in a class about methods of inspiration, of getting deeper and deeper?

MM: Yes, in both composition and creative writing classes, I spend probably the first three-to-four weeks talking about the processes of creativity, about psychological aspects of creativity, about particular techniques. I do little five or ten minute simple, perceptual, sensitivity exercises--describing a small stone I give them or an object on their desk. Sometimes we listen to music and write down the emotions that creates--just jotting down emotional words that come to mind in response to physical stimulants.

LF: Students come to class thinking it's going to be a typical English class, learning to write and then you begin to talk about creativity. Is there surprise registered? What student response do you get to this?

MM: Not so much in the creative writing classes. In the composition classes though, I frequently get surprised looks and statements. They say things like "Boy, never had an English class like this before," or "Gee, nobody's ever taught me to write in an English class before" which is pretty rewarding. I like that shock when I see it.

LF: Sometimes teachers encourage students to brainstorm, to talk about what they are going to write. What's your attitude about this activity?

MM: I do all sorts of different little exercises in terms of pre-writing, freewriting, spiderwebbing, clustering, but in the creative writing class I almost never do group stuff. It's entirely individual work. It has always worked better that way.

In the composition class though, I do a lot of group stuff, partly because in the composition writing my focus is on audience. The students act as simulated audiences for each other. Non-fiction writing is almost entirely for a specific audience. You don't often sit down and write an objective report just for your own personal enjoyment.

LF: What assignments do you give students over the span of a course?

MM: In the creative writing class, I set up a series of exercises that start with devising characters and work through from their physical self, then autobiographies of the characters in their own voices. The next one takes two of the characters the students have already written about and puts them together to see what happens. Eventually from this we move on to plot and so on. That does two things. It covers each of the elements of fiction, but as well over the course of about six weeks, without realizing it, they have written a complete short story. If I said, "Sit down and write a ten page story," they'd be horrified, boggled, shut right down. This way sets up a particular sequence of assignments which are interconnected.

I continue on through drama and poetry in much the same sort of way. The drama sequence grows out of the fiction sequence. I save dialogue until we get to drama and then get them to do some adaptations for stage or television, from stories they've written.

The poetry is quite different, starting off with sounds, rhythm, and repetition. Then we move to image and finally look at traditional forms. In the creative writing course, it's absolutely my course. I get to do what I want.

In the composition course there are about 30 of us who teach the same course. There is an overall course outline and the requirement for 10 - 15 assignments. There are very specific formal things that one is to teach. Report writing, description, narrative, exposition, persuasion. There are also certain topics like the theory of communication and media.

I try to start off with concrete, experiential material--have them write about themselves. It is partly to find out a bit about them, but also description or narration is concrete. Then we move into the more philosophical things.

LF: What requirements do you have for those assignments?

MM: I insist on people writing on every other line. I give the composition classes length guidelines although I try to assure them that I want them to write until they have nothing more to say and then stop. I have deadlines on those composition assignments. That pretty well covers it in term of physical parameters. I give them a background to the assignment, and explain the connection with the "real world". For instance, I had a journalism class last term and worked very hard at showing them the actual commercial possibilities of the different forms that we were writing. We brought in our samples, I talked about my own freelance writing that went on for about four or five years and how I earned my living using those forms. I try to relate what they're doing in my class with the world.

LF: How much actual writing do you have the students do within the class time?

MM: It varies from type of class to type of class. In the composition classes I almost never have them write anything at all in class except for an occasional ten minute freewriting exercise or half hour for journals. With my creative writing classes I have them do at least one hour out of three. It may sound a little cynical, but the first year I taught creative writing and gave them the assignments to take home, they wrote very little. They certainly were not spending an hour, so I find that I get much better writing if they write right in the classroom.

LF: How much are you involved in their writing?

MM: I like to think that one of my tasks is modelling ways of looking at their own writing. I will point out all the good things I see in their writing. I talk to them about the process of leaving their writing for a bit and coming back to it. Then they can pick out all the good things themselves, following my process. Sometimes I say, "Let's just take this one line and see what you can make of it" and then get them to do a "spiderweb" or brainstorming or freewriting from it.

LF: So by the end of term they are doing their own editing?

MM: Yes, they're looking at their own stuff and saying, "I need to cut here and expand here."

LF: Are you conscious of allowing space and silence for a student to struggle with the writing, to find better ways of saying what she means?

MM: Yes, quite. It's something I've been learning to do over the last two or three years...just backing off and not trying to be so immediate about responding to their writing.

LF: Less telling?

MM: Yes, I almost never tell anything anymore. I often describe what a piece of writing says to me or what emotional response it creates in me. I also ask a lot of questions: what did you mean here, why did you put it like this, what would you like to do with this, what could you do to make this character more accessible to your audience? Almost all the commenting I make now is either description or questioning.

LF: What is the importance to you of reading a student's work aloud?

MM: There are two major reasons for it: hearing it come out of the mouth of someone else somehow objectifies it, from your own inner ear. It makes students and me able to assess, feel, where it is working and where it is not. Second is the notion of audience. The teacher is a terribly limited audience. Teachers have this peculiar way of looking at things in terms of punctuation and structure as opposed to content. The process of reading aloud is a kind of publication for students. It creates an immediate and very real audience.

I read the stuff anonymously so they are not embarrassed and they can really listen without feeling any danger. Again we get back to the psychological security and freedom. They can see if people are going to sleep or laughing or crying or looking interested. Those non-verbal reactions give a very immediate kind of response. They need support--they are trying something really new and risky. They do risk quite a lot. They can also listen to people say quite directly, "Those three lines at the beginning about the uncle really moved me." They get the response of 25 people as to what very specific things in the writing worked. I have a real personal prejudice about vague comments on writing. I remember someone with quite a reputation as poet and teacher and critic made a comment about something being a particularly "naked poem." What a stupid comment! There is absolutely nothing a writer can do with that. It gives them nothing in terms of whether it's a good poem, a bad poem, what they should do. How do you put a set of clothes on a poem? It's nonsense. Students don't have this airy, fairy, wishy-washy, pseudo-academic vocabulary. They tend to say, "I like those three words on the second line." They don't say, "Ah, you're using a realist kind of writing."

LF: Do you share your own writing with them sometimes?

MM: Sometimes. I began with the opinion that you were in a no-win situation, sharing your own writing. They might either look at it and say, "This is terrible; why am I learning from her?" Conversely, they may think," Wow, that's so great; how can I possibly do as well." Now I tend to use the assignments to work on whatever I am working on at the moment. And I will share those if the students ask. It increases the sense of collegiality, that we are all writers working together. I may have had more experience, but I am still very much involved in the same processes they are learning.

LF: How much emphasis do you place on revision?

MM: A lot.

LF: Do you allow time in class to revise?

MM: In the composition class, they bring first drafts and I work through a kind of revision worksheet or questionnaire that I have developed. I work through that with them once--what the main idea of their work is, how it's linked in each paragraph, and so on. After that first time, I give them several copies of the worksheet and expect them to do thorough revisions at home.

In the creative writing I don't do much revision --not formally at least, since there is so much to do in the fifteen weeks. I have one or two classes devoted to revision. That's where I might share my own work in progress. I also set up out-of-class projects which they can bring to me for individual consultation. They can get as much feedback from me as they ask for, but it's up to them to ask for it.

LF: How do you evaluate their writing?

MM: Evaluating isn't my favourite part of things. I frankly don't think that grading is useful to the writing process. I have done a fair bit of studying about creativity. Carl Rogers, for instance, talks about fostering constructive conditions for creativity. Unconditional acceptance, understanding, empathy all provide a climate. External evaluation is absent. The mark coming from the outside is a real negative thing in developing an ability to write. Other people besides Rogers and Maslow talk about the fact that focus on marks tends to lower marks, and lower performance. I try to de-emphasize the grading as much as possible.

I'm not in the business of turning out Hemingways in my introductory college creative writing course. I'm in the business of allowing people to discover their creativity, to become comfortable expressing their own creativity.

Now with the composition class the students want grades; the college prescribes it. In those classes I grade each assignment. I break each assignment into five categories: content, organization, sentence structure, diction, and mechanics. I give a letter grade for each of those five sections and then an overall grade for the whole assignment. It takes the emphasis off the overall grade: if you got "A" for the assignment but organization got a grade of "B", the student knows what to work on. Getting a "D" paper doesn't have quite the same disappointment if the content was given an "A" grade. It allows me to look at their whole writing process and help them find what works and what doesn't. I'm not entirely content because I am still convinced that the grading itself has a negative effect on the writing process and I want to change that. I do a lot of commenting, as I said, description and questions. That's exceedingly important, but the actual grades are a pain in the ass. The further I can get away from them the happier I will be.

LF: What comments do you make to students while grading these composition papers?

MM: I do say "missing a semi-colon" occasionally, or "you don't seem to have mastered the business of linking sentences together" and other precise, grammatical things. I will point them out and then give the pages in their English Handbook that deal with that section. If the error turns up again, I get a little more indignant and ask them if they've read the pages and learned the material there. Finally, it becomes "You're not going to pass if you don't solve these problems." I will mention they include a list of good points in their essay and will put numbers beside them so they can see what points another reader gets. I may invite them to use examples for each point to help get to the reader. I may say, "When you see the main points written down like this in a skeleton, do you think they need rearranging?"

LF: So you ask the questions, draw things to their attention and they have the responsibility of answering and repairing?

MM: I will change a mark at this stage if they come up to me and say, "Look, I was connecting this and this" and occasionally they have done a better job than me and I will change a grade.

It takes me 15 - 20 minutes to mark a typical composition paper. It's not all that long to spend with the results of somebody's thinking if they've been at all careful about it. Sometimes I miss things, so I am prepared to listen to them and what they can show me that I missed. If I have, I can adjust marks on that basis, too.

LF: What do you do about late assignments?

MM: I've tried just about everything. My latest attempt is to tell them at the beginning of the course (and in the course outline) that they have a certain number of assignments to do and here are the deadlines. I tell them I understand people have emergencies, so I will accept one paper late without penalty, but after that there will be a penalty. It's their problem. If they want to test me at that, it's up to them. That has worked reasonably well; it seems the most satisfactory combination, recognizing that these are real people with lives outside of school that do have emergencies. It also is respect for me and the fact that I need to get things marked and have deadlines myself. There is some respect for the process of getting work done on time. I think I will keep this one for a while.

LF: To what extent do you negotiate with students about assignments or what goes on in class?

MM: More and more. I began with a very firm sense of what should happen in the classroom and what I should do. When you have twenty-five people in front of you, though, all English speakers talking about communication or writing, there is an enormous wealth of information and experience to draw on. A very teacher-centered classroom, having people sit quietly and listen, is wasting talent and time. More and more I am asking them to come in with suggestions, questions of their own, the matters that are of interest to them. I've always allowed a great deal of free choice in subject matter in assignments. If a student comes to me and says an assignment isn't working for some reason and could she do something else, I sit down and negotiate a change, an adaptation.

LF: What measures do you take in your classroom that are different from your own classes that you took as a student?

MM: I try to make sure that everything that is said is concrete and meaningful. I try to give, and get other students to give, exact emotional reaction about the effect of the writing. For example, "I weep when you write that the dog slipped through the ice and you tried to get it back but couldn't find it." What words in that writing made you weep? I try to keep everything focussed, specific, and practical. I also try to make it clear that mine is only one interpretation of the twenty-five and no better nor worse than the other. I believe that writing is a matter between the writer and the creative partner--the audience. Every student's assessment of a piece of writing is as valid as the next.

LF: How can you say that if some student says "it stinks," it is equally valid with a specific and elaborate response? How do you deal with that?

MM: Stephanie Judy at Castlegar used to talk about a two-step system of teaching. One, start where you are. Two, go somewhere. "It stinks" is not an objective statement about a piece of writing. That is one of the things I teach people. "It stinks? Fine, be specific. Pick the particular words, chapter, paragraphs and decide what it is that really stinks. Not only that, how would you change it?" More often though, people say "Gee, I really liked that." "Yep, now what words? Can you remember any of them. Let's read it again." It is a matter of forcing people in their assessment, evaluation, in their critical thinking, to base it on real evidence.

LF: So, you have them continually slipping in and out of reader-editor-writer role?

MM: Absolutely. All the time.

LF: What sort of teacher would you describe yourself as?

MM: I know I'm very, very verbal. I feel as though the ability to express oneself in the world is a basic plank in the building of humanness.

LF: At the level of survival?

MM: Yes, it is essential in our culture, in our world, for mental, physical, economic survival. It is almost impossible in this country to have a job if you are not able to express yourself reasonably well. Writing well is certainly necessary in just basic, everyday stuff, even filling out driver's licence forms. Even more than that though, what's crucial, is that usage of language--to express, to think, to discover one's world and one's own inner core. To discover that world inside you and the world outside you, writing is a critical tool--and it's the one most accessible to most of us. I have a sense that so many people in our society for one reason or another in their public and high school education have become language traumatized. They come to college saying they can't write, hate writing, hate English. That's the most incredible robbery of one of our basic rights as human beings. I just get incensed when I hear that, and wonder how that damage has happened.

I see my role as teacher primarily as one of giving back to people an ability that is rightfully theirs. I teach and talk about journal writing a lot in both classes, about the business of making sense of the world through writing. If they write stuff that is meaningful for them, the other stuff (punctuation, etcetera) will come. If you decide that you want to publish a book some day, you'll learn, but right now, write this down. They discover they can write, use words, express, make sense in ways they have never done before. I see myself almost as a kind of white-horse crusader riding around giving people this tool of being able to write, express one's own inner meanings in words on paper. It is the most important thing I do as a teacher. All the way through, what I am teaching is to become self-sufficient in their writing processes.

LF: How do you deal with the problem of plagiarism?

LF: How do you deal with the problem of plagiarism?

MM: I tend to use it as a learning experience. I speak about it at the beginning of a term, but when I detect it, I speak to the student. I generally write a note on their paper saying that I want to talk with them about the writing. I ask questions, I describe to them my feeling that this is not their writing. It's not typical of their style. We talk about the problems of academic honesty and I send them off to do the paper again. I remind them to appropriately give documentation of their sources.

LF: Is student discipline ever a problem for you?

MM: Occasionally, but never a huge problem. In a composition class of 25 or 30 students, it gets harder to maintain interest in each person. Little whisperings and "kufuffles" in various back corners. If it's intrusive I am very, very straightforward and will simply say, "Hey you in the back, shut up," or give short lectures about there being a standard of politeness which we observe in this country and this classroom which involves not speaking while other people speak. Once you have done that, other students will get irate and that works much better. I'm not a policeman; they are adults; their peers will shut them up much more effectively than I will.

LF: How do you deal with just plain bad writing?

MM: There are two reasons for illiterate writing. One of them is illiteracy--not too profound--and the other is lack of effort. I work quite differently depending on which it is. If the students are really illiterate, I set up very specialized programs for them within the class. Little extra assignments where they meet with me and do very specific and step-by-step assignments. I have had a fair bit of success at moving people from a functional illiteracy to where they could write paragraphs and get ideas across clearly. If someone has the energy and will to want to get this writing tool, then I will do whatever is necessary to help them do that.

On the other hand, if it's lack of effort, tossing something off because they need a "C" to pass, then I will usually write a great big capital "F" on it and make some comment that indicates my personal sense of righteous indignation that they're wasting my time with this crap. I tend to be pretty straightforward about this.

LF: What frustrations do you have with teaching?

MM: Time. As it is we are just cramming stuff in, whisking over topics. If it's Tuesday, we must be doing advertising. Time in terms of the amount of time it takes me to do the work involved in teaching. I spend about seven hours a day, six days a week physically engaged in some aspect of the teaching process--the marking, the preparation, the actual class teaching. That's not including eating or driving from campus to campus. At least 42 hours a week (and often more) in the actual doing. It takes an enormous chunk out of your life. By the time you have done that much and if you have any kind of an authentic relationship with your students, a lot of emotional and physical energy is long gone by then.

LF: Can anybody teach?

MM: I don't think so. It takes a number of qualities. One is the ability to break down tasks into their smallest discrete chunks. Many people will say I just sit down and write, but it doesn't do a student any good to say just sit down and write. That breaking-into-small-parts process is something I am very good at. I analyze my own process a great deal and read as much as possible about other people's processes. I do that with skiing, with scuba diving, it's the way my mind works.

Another main quality is that I think a really good teacher needs to be able to provide a kind of unconditional love for the students in order to provide that psychological safety and freedom they need to do their best work. They need to have the sense of a very caring openness that will accept what they offer in a spirit of lovingness. It's extremely important. You almost have to experience that unconditional love yourself to be able to provide it for others.

LF: Do you think teachers who do not write themselves have a handicap when they are teaching writing?

MM: Yes, for sure. It's like when I teach scuba diving. If I stand on the edge of the pool and I'm not wet, and I don't know what it's like to get water up my nose, when my students come spluttering to the surface, I'm not going to know why and will have to give them a book.

LF: Teachers need that experience of having words up their nose?

MM: Exactly. Teachers need the experience of the euphoria when it's working well, of the pain when it's working badly, of the ecstasy and the terror. The process is the same whether it's a novelist sending a novel to an editor or publisher or a student handing in an objective report to a teacher. That terror, wonder, and personal involvement with a piece of writing is there. As a teacher you have to be exceedingly aware of that and understand that when you're making your comments about where the writing is not working. You don't imply stupidity because they haven't learned how to use a semi-colon. It's not to say that some students don't give you garbage that is zipped off in ten minutes. You know the difference and I think you have to be aware of the real, vital, human seriousness of what it is you are doing.

LF: You feel strongly that the fact you are a publishing writer influences your own teaching a great deal?

MM: Yes. I was a publishing writer before I started teaching and I continue to work at the writing business. If I hadn't been writing myself I wouldn't know that for a lot of people certain things don't work. Although my process is not a model to impose on every student and I don't neccessarily expect it to work for them.

LF: What qualities of teacher and writer do you think overlap?

MM: Both are ultimately human kinds of activities; I like to think that a kind of liberal humanism overlaps in them both. There is also in both an enthusiasm for and devotion to language. Hopefully that will rub off on your students. A concern with the ethics of living in the Canadian society at this time is essential to both. The writers must connect with their society. The teachers must be intimately aware of the society in which their students live, and teach them in relationship to that.

I think a devotion to the process of creativity on the one hand, that learning and investigating and continual research is essential to both teacher and writer. On the other hand, a devotion to matters of technique and craft are essential for both the teacher as learner and teacher as writer. I slip very easily between the two roles. The other thing that is essential for both is the love of people in general.

LF: Do you think that your teaching has changed over the past five years or so?

MM: I do think my teaching has changed--much less teacher-centered, much more learner-centered. I want them to understand that the teaching and the learning process is really a mutual process. My contribution is to be a master of the rebels. Robertson Davies talks about "fifth business" as being a person without whom the rest wouldn't go on. I set up the environment, work very hard to transfer my own sense of creative loving to the students so that it becomes a class-wide feeling between classmates rather than simply me to them. I think setting the condition for writing, setting an environment which makes it safe and free to write is my responsibility. I make it as inviting as possible to write and then I stand back and allow them to learn by doing. You learn to write by writing. My task is to provide them with optimum conditions and a loving audience.

LF: Do you have other metaphors of yourself as teacher, besides the one of "fifth business"?

MM: One of the ones that comes to mind is that of a slide projector. What I do is shine some light on what it is they already know and can do.

LF: And focus as well?

MM: Yes, and focus. They hand in their little writings to the slide projector and I re-project the writing with some light so they can see better. With more focussing and enlarging they get a better sense of what they are doing. Then they can make their own decisions about what they want to keep and what they want to change or adapt.

The other metaphor is that of a warm body of water. A student can immerse, float, be supported and find out some things. They can do some movements on their own that are a little stiff or too hard to do on land where you are weighted down. Neither are ultimately altered in their essence but both have some new information as a result of the contact.

LF: Do you have certain theoretical or philosophical concepts about teaching that you bring to your classroom?

MM: I see writing as being an essential human activity. I prefer to speak of myself as a writing person--I am very, very much concerned with process and I think of this ethically as well as philosophically. Ethically I believe that the end is not justified by the means. That is not to say that in the classroom I don't look for finished products. I do and I have talked about marking those finished products, but I also mark those in terms of the process. If there are things missing, I go back ask the student, "How did you organize this? What are you thinking about?" because product is process too. Picasso said, "A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done, it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it's finished, it still goes on changing according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it." The students should understand that the process keeps changing the piece of writing, even after they are finished, depending on whoever is looking at it.

LF: Do you encourage students to publish?

MM: Yes I do. When it is appropriate, often at the end of a creative writing class, I speak about the ways of getting published. I will also make comments in particular student pieces when I feel that they are at the point where they could attempt some sort of publication.

One of the things I carry quietly in the back of my mind is trying to get a student writing magazine going at the college. We don't have a creative writing program. A writer who is publishing at any level, I think, has the responsibility to help younger writers begin publishing. The process is an ongoing one and it doesn't end when they finish writing. They need to continue to communicate with others through their writing.

LF: What advice could you give to teachers of writing in the school system?

MM: WRITE. Write every day.

LF: What functions and responsibilities do you see writing teachers as having?

MM: The writing teacher has a responsibility to send each student out of her classroom being more confident and better able to write than when they came in. Writing teachers should be spending a lot of time thinking about language, thinking about critical thinking--they should be among those in society who say, "Wait a minute, let's not just accept this rumour, fad, prejudice. Let's decide whether there are logical fallacies." Part of their job is to be critical thinkers and to be vocal about it.

LF: How do you think we can best prepare teachers of writing?

MM: If I had my way, I would send them out to earn their living by writing for a year. Instead of an "A" on their report, they get a paycheck. Then, although reading the best literature and responding to it is important, it should engage about one third of their curriculum.

Another third of their curriculum should include writing that mimics real-life process. They should have the threat/promise of publishing everything they write, in their teaching magazines. They should write and write and write and write and write. Perhaps a major paper a week or daily writing--seven pages a week. They should do a huge amount of writing.

The last third of their curriculum should be an intense look at ethics and history--everybody from Aristotle and Plato to the existentialists to history of at least Western civilization. They should know how writing, thinking, and acting have evolved over those periods.

They should understand that having a student write the classic essay on what I did on my summer vacation isn't a matter of three paragraphs about something that occurred in 1987 or 1988 but a matter that deals with the class structure in Canada for one thing. What you did on your summer vacation depends a great deal on what class you are in and if your father is unemployed and what particular view of the future you have.

LF: You want writing teachers then, to have a very broad, general education so that they can always bring a kind of informed contextual understanding to students and their writing activities?

MM: Yes. There should be courses in thinking across the curriculum and knowing and information across the curriculum. I believe writing is a way of thinking. We're in a world right now with enormous problems that have been generated by a particular kind of nineteenth century thinking. We have arrived in a position with that sort of thinking that is very close to annihilation. We desperately need new ways of thinking, new kinds of solutions. If we don't develop creative thinking and thinkers, we are in real big trouble. Writing teachers have to be aware of all that, and have that knowledge inform their teaching, every day. They have to be aware of the seriousness, the potential effect their teaching may have on the future of the entire globe. When they are promoting creativity, good things have to happen.

LF: Is there anything else you would like to say about teaching, as a way of closing our conversation?

MM: George Steiner says, "Our mechanism of identity, the enormously intricate procedures of recognition and delimitation which allow me to say 'and I am I', to experience myself and which concomitantly bar me from experiencing you, except by imaginative projection, are thoroughly grounded in language." The ability of each of us to connect with others is intimately bound up with speech and that really is what we are dealing with in the writing/teaching business--a very, very central fact of human identity.

Chapter Three - Rudy Wiebe

In 1934 Rudy Wiebe was born to Mennonite parents in Saskatchewan. Wiebe started writing in a serious way while he was an undergraduate student at University of Alberta, from 1953-1956. He has also studied in Germany, taught at the Mennonite Brethren College, Manitoba, and at Goshen, Indiana. In 1960 he received his Masters of Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Alberta. Professor Wiebe has been teaching in the English department there since 1967--mostly creative writing and Canadian Literature.

His best known book, _The Temptations of Big Bear_ (1973), won the Governor General's Award for Fiction, but he has also written several other novels: _Peace Shall Destroy Many_ (1962), _First and Vital Candle_ (1966), _Blue Mountains of China_ (1970), _The Scorched-Wood People_ (1977), _The Mad Trapper_ (1980), _My Lovely Enemy_ (1983); three anthologies of short fiction--_Where is the Voice Coming From?_ (1974), _Alberta: a Celebration_ (1979), and the _Angel of the Tar Sands_ (1982); and a play called _As Far as the Eye Can See_ (1977). He has also edited six other anthologies of short stories. The focus of his work usually centers on the history and people of Western Canada.

Rudy Wiebe Interview

Rudy Wiebe is a busy man--especially during the academic term. He is often invited out of city, out of province, out of country to speak about writing, to read from his works, and to contribute in many other ways to the global writing community. He teaches from September until April and does most of his fiction writing when he is not teaching, since both require a great deal of energy for him.

Twice before I worked with Rudy--once as a co-editor for the short story anthology West of Fiction and once as the writer of the study section of the McClelland and Stewart edition of The Mad Trapper. I also had met him perhaps six or seven times in a more social context. Talking with him about his teaching practices was a quite different experience than discussing which stories should be included or how to find old photographs at the Glenbow Museum or hearing him sing a fine tenor solo in his church.

We met at 3 p.m. on Wednesday, April 6, 1988 in his third floor office in the Humanities Building at the University of Alberta. From the window we could see the early spring green emerging all over the North Saskatchewan river valley. It was easy to wonder about other springs, centuries ago.

He settled back in his swivel chair by his desk and said that he had two hours. Since he just recently had answered a large number of the same questions about his writing in an interview with Thomas Gerry, he elected to respond only to the teaching questions. His answers regarding his own writing process can be found in the book _So To Speak: Interviews with Contemporary Canadian Writers_, edited by P. O'Brien (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1987).

Two tape-recording machines were placed on his desk and we began talk about what goes on behind the closed doors of his creative writing classes. With the exception of two phone calls, until 5 p.m., Rudy explained his praxis in clear, often gentle--sometimes emphatic--tones. We ended abruptly on the hour; he was on his way to meet a writer from Sweden.

Rudy Wiebe Teaching Interview, April 6, 1988

LF: How long have you been teaching writing?

RW: I first taught creative writing in Goshen College in 1963, then came to U. of A. in 1967. I've been here ever since. I've always avoided teaching summer school because I get so much teaching done during the year. So that's been my teaching, teaching at Goshen College, a writing course in which I had no control over the enrolment. And here, which is a limited enrollment course, always has been.

LF: And are you able to teach a sort of optimum course number of 14 to 16 students?

RW: Well, I do of course. I never let any more people in. That's all. We've devised the sort of system now they have to give me a portfolio of their writing which does not include essays they've written in English. It has to be fiction, something imaginative.

LF: So all the students who are in your creative writing class are there because of your personal choice?

RW: Yes, and their personal ability that they prove to me.

LF: But it's not a compulsory course?

RW: No, it never has been. I've taught Canadian literature and freshman English, the short story, and in Goshen I taught a lot of literature courses, fiction, history of the novel, that kind of thing, and poetry and prose too.

LF: Is there a difference between your teaching writing in compulsory courses and your teaching writing in creative writing courses?

RW: Well, I never taught writing in compulsory courses, other than essays that are required by the course itself which is a composition course. You teach them how to write a good essay, a good critical essay, a good analytical essay, a comparison essay, those kinds of things.

LF: Do you do that in your literature classes?

RW: In freshman literature you do. But since I haven't taught first-year lit. for about 13 years, I wouldn't really know how to do it without a good deal of boning up on it.

LF: You don't want to teach the neophyte?

RW: I've always somehow or other been able to avoid it. Several times I have wanted to, because it's interesting to teach first-year English because there's a lot more interest. There's a kind of energy and drive that first-year students have, while second-year or third- or fourth-year students at university are so blasé that they can't be bothered. They've heard it all. You really need to do something shocking to get their attention. But first-year students, especially out of high schools where they haven't had perhaps the best of teaching, people who are involved with a lot of things besides literature, you know, they often bring a kind of energy and drive to things that's quite exciting, a curiosity. They don't know it, and almost anything you say is new.

LF: Do you deliberately set at the beginning of term a certain protocol for dealing with material?

RW: You have to, because, if students dislike each other, or a group breaks up into factions, one group against another, it doesn't help you very much. It helps nothing at all. And, actually, I haven't suffered much from that kind of factionalism or distrust between people. Once in a while, you do run into a problem because someone wants to be really private in their writing. They're afraid that if they voice their good idea or if somebody reads their good idea, somebody will steal it. A person like that is almost useless in a class. You have to get rid of them.

LF: You can probably determine some of that in the interview?

RW: Yes, but you can't really tell that kind of neurosis. You try to create an atmosphere of a sense of everyone working together. One of the ways I've tried to prevent that kind of competition or jealousies--it creates its own problems--I never mark an individual paper, an individual story. When I took creative writing an instructor always gave some kind of percentage mark, you know within 5%. It always was some multiple of five. So that you always knew this is an 85 story, and this is a 70 story. I don't do that. One of the benefits of that is, students don't compare notes, say well I'm ten percent worse than you are, and work up an animosity, even though in the process of the discussion you make it pretty clear that you think this is a strong story, for such and such reasons and this is a weaker story or a less-realized story for such and such reasons. Part of it has to do with me being sort of generally tough and nasty to everybody, you know, no matter how good they are.

LF: What do you mean, tough and nasty?

RW: Well, you begin with very high standards and you don't let them down. So you never tolerate a spelling mistake. You mark every spelling or grammatical mistake unless it is there for the purpose of stylistic expression. You always demand the most of everyone. You say this is good but this is a problem here. You're critically tough on every person that you have. What the effect of this is, it's everyone against the instructor.

LF: So you set up yourself as sort of teacher as stranger, teacher as critic?

RW: Oh, absolutely. You are not the good guy. I've never taught that way. You are not the good guy that makes everybody feel good. You don't care if they go out crying as they sometimes do, whether people sometimes leave abruptly or after the class. in one sense you do care, but in another sense, of course, you don't. If you can't take it here, don't pretend the world of writing is an easy world to even bother with. If you can't take it here where you have generally friendly understanding and acceptance, you're sure as heck not going to accept the impersonal rejection letters if you try to follow up in the writing world.

LF: But there's still a sense of struggle?

RW Yes, but at a certain point, you have to keep saying, "Yes, go ahead, keep doing this, this is fine." They don't quite believe you, but they keep on doing it. The role changes as you're working. First of all, you don't start off too softly, too gently.

LF: This is a serious business and we're here doing it.

RW: And if you don't want to do this, there are a lot of easier courses that you can take that'll teach you a lot of different things. The skills that you need, plus the imagination, and just the plain sort of subliminal insight are not easily come by. To write a relatively mediocre story is not that hard. All these things are not that difficult to do in one sense, but to really do it superbly is. So you never allow students to underestimate that.

LF: Do they ever go away? Do you set out, "Well, this is what we do here," and they don't like it and leave?

RW: Very few students drop out. Sometimes they get so far behind they're just discouraged about it. But very few students drop out, partly because you've put them through the wringer, handing in two or three stories in order to get into the course in the first place. This already cuts out a lot of them because either they're too fearful about that or they realize what's going to be involved. As soon as you come into class you say, "This is what you're going to be doing, so if you want to take this course, start now, and write it now, because when we come back in September I'm going to be giving you deadlines." "I'm going to say, "Two and half or three weeks from now, you have to have a story done." I suppose I shouldn't overplay that difficulty, that sort of toughness in the class, but, I think, it's a major component in avoiding the big problems of factionalization. I want to create an atmosphere of everybody's working in there together; nobody has got this matter licked ever. If you do it in one story, your next story may be a disaster. A student in the first term may actually write a good story, but can never do it again, for odd reasons. I use the analogy of Wayne Gretzky. The unbelievable consistency of that man is what makes him a great player. Not that he scores three or four goals a night, any player on any given night can score three or four goals. The point is that he averages 2.8 points a night, every night. He's always consistent. That's what a writer has to work towards too: if you want to make it as a writer you have to be consistent. Every story that you work on has to be at a certain level. There's no point in pretending that it isn't hard. It can only be done by the most professional approach.

LF: How do you use other students in class?

RW The better students realize that this is one of many ways of doing this. They become very tough critics of each other and do the most difficult of the critical work for you. They sense this is weak and why it's weak, because you've talked about it before. You always give them reasons why your opinions were what they were, literary reasons, not personal reasons ever. You never bother talking about where they get the idea for the story from, you're just talking about the story as it's given to you.

LF: "Here are your words?"

RW: Yeah, yeah. And this is the text; these are the characters; this is the situation. How well does it realize the best potential of the situation as a story? We don't talk about whether that may have happened. It's none of our business, and most of us don't know it anyway.

LF: So you do a fair amount of quite critical listening by the time the thing gets rolling into the term? You listen that all the points are brought up?

RW: Yeah, you make sure... and if someone doesn't raise them, then you ask them direct questions about it. At a certain point you say, "Okay, we have three stories to discuss tonight, who wants to be the primary speakers?" They can volunteer and perhaps avoid a story that would embarrass them for one reason or another. And then, you say, "All right, what do you see as some of the strengths of this story. Who'd like to begin?" That usually brings you to things they think are strong, but some of which you may doubt, and you ask them, "Why do you think that's a positive virtue? What does it do?" The discussion begins, and each of them pick it up. That brings out some of the major points. There's a limited time to spend on each story, and you want to make sure they get one or two main points, so if those don't emerge then you ask questions directly. The more experienced students will do the major critical work.

LF: How many times in a term would a student be a primary speaker?

RW: Almost every class because there are only twelve people in a class. If you have a three hour class, everyone of them is expected to speak every time. At a certain point, the person whose story is discussed responds; he can ask or complain about something not having been seen, for example.

LF: So, a kind of defense of the work?

RW: Yes, but also often, they say, "Yes I knew this, but I didn't know how to solve it or I didn't have time to finish." It often happens that in stories, because of the nature of deadlines and the nature of students, beginnings are strong, and they get pushed by time toward the end. After you've read as many stories as I have, you can say, "You just finished this one off, didn't you, because you had eight pages? You had all these things started which never went anywhere, right?"

LF: What about writers who want privacy for their own writing? Do you deal with that at all in the classroom, or is it just an unnatural situation where every thing you write is up there for grabs and there is no privacy?

RW: Oh, well, you never pretend this is the way you would actually do the work. This is a learning situation. The point is that in a classroom the learning can be done in a group, especially the learning that requires you to do something directly rather than to know something. I mean it's different learning how to write, more analogous to learning how to play the piano, or the violin, or how to play hockey, than the straight impartation of knowledge. It is an actual doing so the practice is the important thing.

LF: So there's not much, if any, lecturing?

RW: Well, there is. Yeah, I do at different times, but it's either more spontaneous from questions that arise or set things that I know that students need to know. I lecture on point of view, or on the different patterns of stories, or where you get stories from, that would bother students not having thought of it particularly before.

LF: You talk about inspiration and creativity?

RW: Yeah. And how little that can be counted on in certain ways, or how you need to practise the thing in order for it to really work for you. Creativity is more like a muscle than a blinding light. We talk about how you find ideas that you can write stories about. The more interesting students try a wide variety of things, others concentrate more on one or two kinds of things.

LF: One of the things you say is that a writer needs to learn how to read, how to see, how to hear. Do you talk about that?

RW: Yeah. How you look at the world.

LF: Do you ever talk about your own writing and how that happens?

RW: Maybe once or twice in a class, I'll talk about how an idea developed because it works in the context we're talking about. Often, students have good ideas but they don't actually see where the best possibility lies for the best conflict or for the most interesting way of seeing it. Perhaps they don't read very much, they take the most obvious way of telling a story. Because many of them have grown up on television they all have the same patterns and ideas in their head. That's often not completely true because the writing students I get usually are the ones who didn't watch that much T.V. I don't talk about my own opinions or life experiences very much, I don't think. Maybe I do more than I realize, but I doubt it. It's important that you are a writer if you're teaching it, so that you're not talking only in the abstract, you can talk from personal experience.

LF: You've also gone through the process of struggling to find the writing?

RW: Always always always, yeah. I've been writing more short pieces, for a lot of reasons, and so they know that that's what's happening.

LF: There is a real sense of a kind of community of writers?

RW: Yeah, we're all in the same boat. Although we may be writing say at somewhat different levels, that doesn't mean to say that at any given time one of the students may not write as good and strong a story as I would write. It happens.

LF: A lot of teachers get people to talk about what they're going to write, to brainstorm. Do you?

RW: I never do that. Once I did this. I said, "Let's go around the room and say where does this story go from here." Each one invents something else. I realized that that was the craziest thing I could do, because what I was doing in effect was closing the options for the actual writer, whatever he or she has imagined that story to be. If they see it reflected by some of the extemporaneous thinking of some of the other people, who may be more imaginative than they are, they could get discouraged. I think in this case, this was one of the weaker writers in the class. They were all pretty good, but there were people more imaginative than this writer. What I was doing was really placing extraordinary pressure and actually a boundary on what they could do, so at a certain point I suddenly said, "Stop it stop it. This is no good." And we stopped. No, you don't want that. I mean it's quite different when you're working with a movie producer where you're trying to develop a way of dealing with a story. I never know what kind of a story students are going to hand in. I never ask them. That's their business.

LF: When you give assignments how do you outline them?

RW: I just say write a story.

LF: Do you specify length?

RW: No, I've never specified length. We were talking about that the other day in one of the senior writing classes. Maybe what one should do in the beginning semester is give specific assignments.

LF: You mean like try a story from this particular point of view?

RW: Write a story, a first-person-point-of-view story where the situation turns back on the first person. There's something that reverses on itself, "the biter bit." I mean you could make up any number of problems like that, easily enough. And some were arguing that this would give each person a stronger sense of how to do things.

LF: In terms of craft?

RW: Yeah. And there may be something to that. I've never done that, but I can see the validity. It may be useful in classes where you haven't got as many young and creative imaginations as you have here. If you get them anywhere you'll get them at a university in a senior English class.

LF: Hopefully--

LW: Yeah, the chances are better than community colleges. They're better than say classes for seniors. It's really a very select class. And at best you expect them to be highly intelligent, so that if they haven't got that much imagination, their intelligence itself will help them over a lot of things. You're working with a relatively select group. If they're interested in writing, they've already read a lot. You do all the time give them examples of what they should have read. It's amazing how little they have sometimes. But, there's a lot of things you assume, a certain kind of intelligence and imagination, which then you don't want to limit by giving them, say, elementary assignments. So I've basically never done that very much.

LF: Do you just assign a set number of stories?

RW: Yep. I tell them at the beginning of the term they're going to write four stories; these are the deadlines, and I divide them into groups. The next deadline is next week, and I ask for volunteers who'll have the story ready for next week. Usually there's a couple, even three, and I say that's fine. And you say who wants to do it the next week, and the week after. The group that begins quicker, ends quicker. They've got time at the end of term, and if they've been writing a lot during the summer often they have stories at a stage where in another week they can get them in pretty good shape. As much on a volunteer basis as possible. After they're in a group you see, then I say, "Your deadlines are now." Unless they have a really valid reason, a personal valid reason, I expect them to be on time with it. People like having their work discussed. I mean their work which they have done is taken with all seriousness. There's an element of strength in that. It's not just tearing the text apart. It's someone seriously considering the work, and they write for their readers. They know the group they're writing for, and that's a good thing.

LF: That's where they get a sense of audience.

RW: Yes, that is the best sense of audience. It is one of the major things about a classroom. A writer writes in isolation and sends it off to some unknown editor somewhere, never knowing who the editor is. No one has ever met Connie Rooke at Malahat Review or Geoff Hancock at Canadian Fiction Magazine, or whoever it is at Grain or Dandelion. When you get a letter back that doesn't accept it, there's nothing specific told you. The whole situation of a classroom with a presumably qualified instructor and an audience that is also involved in the writing that will consider your work seriously and tell you why they consider it inadequate is a major thing in learning how to write.

LF: You don't have them write during class time at all?

RW: Never. And they never read in class either, out loud.

LF: The people come with the story read, and prepared to talk?

RW: Yes. And the other thing that they do in the classroom is that they generally have written their critiques out on the copies of the stories they have. They hand them back the same way that the instructor does. His comments are handed back so that the student, besides getting the benefit of the discussion in class, also has those individual comments that raise questions on the story. So there's a lot of feedback on a story.

LF: What do you think about grade school or high school teachers having students write in the classroom?

RW: That's quite different, I think. You're operating at a different level altogether. For younger children, for example, doing things at the same time and doing them in a classroom is quite sensible and proper. Part of school is the activity of the school itself. That's not true at a university where you meet at most for three hours a week. Everyone is assumed to be an adult who is a self-starter. Part of what it means to be a writer is that you can do it yourself. If someone phones you up and gives you a deadline, you have to do it by the deadline. I explain to the students, "This is an assignment I just did for the CBC. I have to do it by a certain date and it has to be 19 or 20 minutes long." And the buggers, of course, cut it. They say, "We only have 15," and I say, "Oh no you don't. You said 20 and I want 20." So we settle on 18. Something has to go, right? I mean that's part of what it means to be a professional writer. You have to be able to do it right from the top.

LF: So you're not involved really during the process of the writing?

RW: Well, sometimes. Students come in and say, "I'm having a devil of a time with this story," and we start talking. It happens all the time. You have individual discussions with individual students, yes. Mostly, they are really very independent, and that's, of course, what you're trying to train them to be anyway. So they hand in their pieces and I don't even look at them before I get them xeroxed.

LF: So however they are in their raw form, that's how they're presented?

RW: That's right. That can get you into trouble. If some student starts getting "smart alecky," hands in scatological or sexually suggestive things about instructors or members of the class or pornographic something or other, the whole thing grinds to a halt and--

LF: Do you just deal with it as literature?

RW: Oh, no, you don't deal with pornography as literature. A student can be nasty, trying to get back at an instructor. I mean that does happen. But almost never, because we're dealing here with literate, intelligent adults and you always begin working with them that way. If they then prove that's not true, then you deal with them summarily as children, right? That's what, of course, makes university to some extent different from some of the other institutions, different levels of a child's growth, right?

LF: Yes, you don't have that luxury in some cases.

RW: No, but here you do. Either you have intelligent young people, or older people who are coming back to university and who don't have time to be treated like children. They know how to deal with responsibility and they work that way.

LF: Are you conscious of allowing space and silence for students to struggle with their writing? Are there pauses in the discussion sometimes where you're just sort of quiet and allow the student to come to things.

RW: Well, usually, there's somebody who's willing to talk. There's lots of space where an individual can be very silent. This can become a bit of a problem. Some of the best writers in the class don't talk very much. I've got a situation right now where it seems the student who in her own writing is probably the strongest writer, certainly has the best sense of story structure, is very reluctant to speak. She will say, "Everything I wanted to say has already been said." So I say, "I'll ask you first next time." I don't let her off the hook, but at the same time, you recognize that writers are not necessarily the best writers just because they can talk a lot.

LF: Sometimes it's the opposite.

RW: Yeah, that's right. They're reluctant to talk. It's not for me to necessarily push them about it. I just try to make them aware that if they want their piece intelligently discussed, then they should really be willing to contribute, even if they are shy. I've never been able to solve that problem really well. Then there's the reverse; people who talk and talk are the first to open the discussion. They have to be prevented. I say, "No, not you, you've talked enough. I want someone else."

LF: Part of the job is referee?

RW: I don't hesitate about these things of course. They take it from me. Presumably the older I get, the more irascible I'm allowed to be. My grey hairs are purchasing me whatever grey hairs purchase you.

LF: You probably ride a little on your reputation, because word passes around what sort of person you are.

RW: Well, I hope some of them have read something I've written. Generally in the course of the year they certainly do. Not that I tell them to but--

LF: I think you said you didn't ever read student work out loud.

RW: Well, I do. You read a sentence or a paragraph, but very rarely. I mean they've all got the text in front of them, so you just point out on page five.... You don't waste time reading it aloud.

LF: You say you waste time. I wonder if there aren't some things that can be determined occasionally because...?

RW: They sound right?

LF: Yeah, there is an oral tradition to the whole business of story telling. I wonder if you buy the notion that you can hear errors or hear problems in writing that you might not be able to see?

RW: Well, that's true. I suppose I don't take that into consideration very much. We're working with written texts. We're looking at stories as printed things. This is generally the way we confront stories. I do talk quite a lot--perhaps in the last couple of years I've talked about it more because I've encountered it more--the oral tradition of story telling, and I do tell a lot of stories, actually, in the process of teaching, giving them examples of something.

LF: You model the story telling?

RW: Or you say, "Have you read this story?" and none of them has and then you summarize the story. It's about this; it's a parallel situation; or this subject is dealt with there; this is the way Faulkner or Chekhov deals with it. Then you tell them the story. Or you ask them to tell a story that is important, that they remember as an example. But I don't do that much with the text in front of us. Partly because there is quite a difference when it is talked and when it is read off the page. I will use lots of examples from people who do not read or write--quite a number of the Indian and Inuit people from up north, who are magnificent story tellers, but most of them don't write at all. Their language isn't even written as far as they're concerned. But, they'll tell you stories that are very powerful. Stories like that live on in your personal memory, and you tell them again. So when I tell a story like that it's a very much different story than I first heard.

LF: The stories you've been told or learned of and wrote into your novels would survive oral reading. I just wonder if you ever talk about that?

RW: Yeah, in a lot of the classes we don't get down to those fine points; we've got so many other things to learn. But I suppose that's one of the things we should talk about. We don't perhaps talk as much about style as we should, although we do to some extent. Like in one of the last stories we had just yesterday: the question was raised that if the story is told from the point of view of a nine-year-old boy or whatever, then the language does become really critical.

LF: Do you spend a lot of time talking about revision? How much emphasis do you place on this?

RW: Generally I say you can rewrite one story that you've done if you want to and some of them take advantage of that. It's in the rewriting that the story starts getting better. Take advantage of what we've talked about using some of the criticism that has come across. For most of them, they have written so little, it's more important almost that they get more ideas going. On the other hand, I'm thinking of a man who was in Ottawa whose first novel has just been published, and who was a graduate student of mine in the '70's. It's almost 12 years since he's been away from a class here, but amazingly enough, so consistent is the way he sees and writes that the stories he's publishing now had their origins in the stories that he wrote then. But that's pretty rare that kind of consistency. He came to class with already a very formed fictional way of seeing things, and it developed somewhat. But he's very slow. He once told me he had an entire summer to work on something. He wrote almost nothing. I asked what was the matter with him and he said he had had a problem with a finger nail on his one finger. So he couldn't type. I swore at him, you know. It's true, he had a sore finger. But four month's worth? The trouble is you never doubted that he was a writer, that he would eventually get his novel done. It was an enormous novel, 800 pages long. He cut it down 200 pages! The publisher who finally accepted it is going to publish it in four parts, four separate books.

LF: You mentioned that summative grades give you a bit of heartburn for a number of reasons, so what comments do you make when someone hands a story in?

RW: Always specific things. If he's got a good style or a good way of seeing things, it doesn't mean he's necessarily good at shaping a story or bringing it to a conclusion or getting a character out of a kitchen. There's always a lot of specific things you can work on. I notice it in the class if someone has it, the way of seeing a thing fictionally and grasping it and shaping it. Sometimes students have that almost instinctively as it seems, and others you just fight it and fight it and fight it, and you can keep saying if you did this and this and this it would improve the story, but the next story, it'll have somewhat the same kinds of problems. They can't see it.

LF: Back to the notion "you can teach the writing but you can't teach the imagination, the way of seeing"?

RW: Yeah, you certainly can't teach the perception or the ability to see patterns or striking possibilities, the psychological ramifications of what you're doing. You can't teach people that.

LF: It's a kind of quantum leap that's intuitive, I guess.

RW: Yeah.

LF: Back to the business of evaluating?

RW: The university requires that you do it.

LF: How do you do it? When you're looking at a paper and you're sitting there with your pen, how do you evaluate?

RW: I don't do the individual pieces. That saves me something.

LF: You don't assign a grade, but you evaluate it in some way, or do you just ask a series of sort of pertinent questions for the writer to look back on?

RW: Yeah, I write my comments out at the back, either general comments about the story as a whole, or specific things on which I may have commented in the margins. At the end of the term or the year, you look at all the four, eight stories, whatever the case is, and basically you read most of the things all through again, so you've got 12 students, 48 stories, hundreds of pages of fiction. Then it's a judgement in terms of where you think this person stands. Is this superb, outstanding? Should it be 9? Or excellent, which would be 8, or very good, which is 7, or good, which would be 6? Occasionally it's below 6, but generally between 6 and 9 is where I go, because if you've screened them properly, you shouldn't end up really even with anybody in 6. It's just how much work they've put into it then. But 4's or 5's, they simply wouldn't have handed in enough or they missed assignments or things like that, because otherwise they shouldn't be there at all.

LF: Have you got any notion about the way teachers could approach creative writing projects with students in the school system in terms of the grading or evaluating?

RW: Well, I've sometimes seen these comments from things students hand in to me, saying, "This was a story my high school teacher really liked," and so I end up, inadvertantly, seeing the comments that they write at the end. I suppose people who see my comments would feel the same way. I don't know. I have trouble with that. I have almost no experience at all in knowing what teachers write at the end of stories.

LF: Well, I mean a mental set about reading a paper. Are you first a human reader, and if the story moves you in some way, if you find it has something significant to say, do you make those kinds of comments about things that you read? You say you mark every spelling error. How much of your attention and your comments are mechanical or organization?

RW: Well, you read mechanically. If they're writing with sentence fragments, they don't know how to use paragraphs or keep misusing the tenses of the word "lay", you mark these, things you notice instantly because you're trained to read proper English so you can mark them instantly. It is an important thing; if you want to be a writer you have to know the grammar that you're violating, for instance, if you want a personality or a given voice to violate the grammar.

LF: The old cliche about you have to know the rules before you can break them?

RW: Yes, that's certainly true of grammar and spelling. There's only one way to spell and it has to be memorized mostly in English and by now you should have memorized it. There are two different things beyond that: how effectively the story is made in terms of it being a story. You have to have a very good sense of what stories are, how they are made. What we see in a story keeps changing a lot. Kinds of stories you read in the 1980's you would have never read in the 1940's, when certain kinds of tightly plotted things or realism ruled the roost. You have to as a writer read a lot yourself in the best. What you do you read? You subscribe to magazines or journals and read what's the latest thing.

LF: You know what's being written in your own community now?

RW: In the best journals in the world. You don't bother with those that aren't the best. There's no point. Life's too short to read poor stuff. You have to keep up to date in your taste in what's happening in fiction. You use your critical perceptions on stories there too. You say, this is a poor story, this is a better story. As an instructor, part of what you're doing is quite artificial; you know you're trying to teach somebody how to do something, but in another sense you're just an ideal kind of editor who would be sending it back to a writer saying these are the reasons why I couldn't accept your story, actually giving every reason that you could find. There are two things you say. "These are the problems, but the story is so strong and so powerful that I wish you'd rewrite, or work on these things, if you feel you can, and send it back to me." You're acting really as an editor.

LF: Do you talk about publishing or encourage people to publish?

RW: At a certain point, yes. Sometimes you come across a story that is superbly done, is complete in itself and you think well, this is a story as good as any I've read in five Canadian literary journals. I say to the student, "Why don't you try this?"

LF: You have prizes for the first published work?

RW: No, no, but if something good like that happens to a student--we always talk for 10, 15 minutes about what's going on in the writing world. They say, "I'm going to be reading," or "So and so has won the Journal literary prize." These kinds of things often come up. You make sure people know. Eunice Scarf won the Prism Writing Contest, short story, with a prize of $1000, plus publication. I told them that right away. It's very encouraging to them to hear this. At the beginning of term I tell them about all the famous writers who have taken these classes. It's very likely that one of them will do the same if they keep writing.

LF: Over the course of the term there would be quite a rigid discipline for good stories and for good marks? How do you deal with terrible writing?

RW: You just discuss it, and say, "This is bad, this is bad, this really bad."

LF: "It doesn't work; characterization's crappy; point of view doesn't work?"

RW: Yeah. Or you know, "You've got a wonderful, a terrific dramatic situation here, but you just throw it away." Even the worst of criticism, the toughest, most destructive, it's usually not without any redeeming qualities at all. If it is, well, then, it's partly your fault. You shouldn't have let a person like that in your class. It happens of course. And that's difficult. And you have your problem with you for the term or the whole year if that's the way the course goes. Sometimes they improve, amazingly. They realize how tough it is, and they can't get away with any crap.

LF: Do you ever have to deal with plagiarism?

RW: I've been spared mostly of that. I've sometimes discovered it long after the fact.

LF: That's a little frustrating.

RW: There's nothing you can do then.

LF: And do you even talk about that?

RW: Never. I wouldn't bother talking about it unless it actually came up. I mean what's the point? I emphasize so much you telling your own particular story, the story that only you can tell, that I don't think generally speaking students are even tempted by that. A lot of this is prevented by the fact that this course is not compulsory. Every student who gets there has already gone through a screening process and has already usually written a number of things. You are not forcing students to do something that they have very little aptitude for or interest in. Perhaps some shysters have gotten past me, I don't know. It's no concern of mine because there's no way they can go anywhere doing that anyway. They're just shooting themselves in the foot if they do that. There's such an extraordinary freedom about writing stories; in writing stories there's no one right way. There's one right way presumably of talking about Ophelia's relationship with her father, or Cordelia to Lear, or whatever. That kind of pressure is off. You're not looking for the one and only right answer.

LF: Do you negotiate or collaborate at all about assignments?

RW: Oh, yeah, we talk about that. Sometimes it becomes clear it's just becoming too heavy. We say, "Okay instead of eight stories we'll do seven because we're spending a lot of time on these stories, as we should, and they're good." The other thing I sometimes do with the senior class is we go to the farm at Strawberry Creek, and spend the whole day talking about writing. The graduate class went out once at noon, stayed overnight, and came back the next evening. There was a lot we had to discuss and by that time the class felt good enough with each other to do that and we had a good time. One 407 Creative Writing class ended up at a bar the other night. They were talking there about continuing the class after the school term is over. Quite a number of people do this, stay as writing groups. People drop away but the core stays and decide to meet once every couple of weeks or whatever at different homes. For some of them that's important. They would like to do that, and I said, "Sure, go ahead, by all means," but I never join these groups. If they want to go on by themselves, they become their own authorities then. It's a mutual group.

LF: Do you have major kinds of frustrations in teaching? Are there things that frustrate you about the teaching?

RW: Yeah, I suppose the major one is that you can never really discuss any story well enough, that you can sort of feel this would be the best way of doing it. I don't know. It depends on different times, the things that bother one most about teaching.

LF: Are you saying that time is a critical factor? You don't have enough time to do something?

RW: Yeah. It's a question of whether you ask them to write a lot of stories or whether you just ask them to do a couple of stories, and just keep working and working and working on those few stories--literally what happens if you're a writer. I, in my actual practice, don't write a story every three weeks and expect it to be perfect. I work on one story or at the most two, and it sometimes takes me months. The last story I thought about for 17 years, then it took me a month and a half to write it. I am not expecting a story that they write in class to be of world-class standard. As a professional writer, you would like your story to be readable anywhere, and impressive anywhere in the world where English is read. Your expectations are somewhat different. It's more important for them to get more practice in writing, because amazingly enough, they don't have much practice in writing stories. After the third story they expect to be writing a perfect story; it's ludicrous. I use the example of my son who played hockey since he was five years old or six, and played it till he was 16, for ten years, practicing every winter, sometimes two or three nights a week. He still wasn't able to play in the NHL. Maybe one of the uses of practising writing is that you begin to appreciate so much more other kinds of things about writing--how difficult, how superb it can be--it makes you a better reader.

The things that make you happy, of course, are when people you've worked with do write well and sometimes superbly. It's amazing how long it takes sometimes. It works differently for different people. I wouldn't pretend that I had much to do with it. But it's just... something like that blossoming out, say later in life, and then you remain with students like that. That's a good thing.

LF: Do you teach differently than you were taught writing?

RW: Well, I do, because the only writing course I ever took was by a professor who wasn't an imaginative writer himself.

LF: Was that Dr. Salter?

RW: Salter, who could not write a story, a superb lecturer and literary critic, could write wonderful rhetoric and recognize great literature, but couldn't write himself. I imagine what I do is rather different being a practitioner myself. I haven't taken many writing courses. The other course I took was at Iowa. They used the workshop method in Iowa. Salter didn't use the workshop method. He used basically a lecture/analysis method, and he would often read stories in class. So I guess, the workshop method I learned at Iowa and the kind of sort of implacable standards that Salter had, informed a lot of my writing or teaching of it. And I see almost the same kind of thing when I go and visit Aritha's [van Herk] class for example, that sort of thing carries on.

LF: This is the standard and you better stick to it.

RW: Yeah, and you always try to write the best possible story you can, and you always deal with stories as if they were written by Frank O'Connor or William Faulkner. That's the way you take them apart, and the standards that you accept. And you always look at it in terms of it being the best possible story that could be written. If you expect a lot of things like that, the best possible things, then you can often get them, once in a while.

LF: Do you think anybody can teach writing?

RW: Well, you can teach a lot of things about writing, otherwise it would stupid for me to do this all my life.

LF: Do you think that teachers who don't write themselves are handicapped in a way?

RW: Well, they have to at least be really, really interested and eclectic readers. If they're not that, then I think they really can handicap their best potential writers. And I think that may be what happens. I don't know how this could be done, but to encourage the imaginative expression in words of children is really something quite magical, because children should be, and often are, so uninhibited by all the things that hem adults in, and they love language so much. They like to play around with language, verses, and nonsense syllables. That gets set so rigidly by the time they get older that all that fun stuff gets lost.

LF: You've clearly earned the right to talk about writing. But is there some kind of way that that affects your own pedagogy? Do you do things in the classroom a certain way because you're a writer?

RW: I'd have to try to imagine how I'd teach if I wasn't a writer. One of the things is clearly that often the problems they have, you recognize instantly because you've had them yourself, or you've solved them yourself. It's easier to recognize the problems of fiction because you've done it yourself. Often they ask you those kind of questions. How do you revise? And you say, "Well, what often happens when I revise is that the second time around the story is worse than the first time around because two things happen. The original spontaneity is gone, often, and that's maybe half the strength of your story to begin with, so what you have to do in your revisions is to try to keep that, or encapture that, plus solving the more formal problems that you've recognized, or weaving in the new strands of material that will make this a whole pattern rather than just a truncated pattern or finishing off designs that you began but never finished." So there are two quite different functions, and perhaps as a writer, I recognize that more clearly than other people who don't write. There are two different functions in writing:, one is the right-hand creative if you want to look at it that way, the creative function of making the thing, and the other is the left-hand of criticizing it, and not being content with the making.

LF: That's not the place to stop?

RW: Yeah. If you don't write yourself, you can only do the left-hand work, if you want to keep on this analogy. And you never have the experience of doing the right- hand work. So, in a very important part of what the student is supposed to be doing, you cannot really partake because you haven't done it yourself. This is never so in an academic situation. I mean, in any other academic situation, presumably the instructor who expects you to write a critical or analytic article has done dozens of them herself, sometimes hundreds, so she knows exactly how to approach that piece, and how to write it. She's got a very firm idea. So that, really in some sense you need to be a practitioner. At the same time you don't really need to be the best of practitioners in order to do it. One of the most successful coaches in hockey now is Glen Sather who was a third rate hockey player. But he did play hockey, and he knows what it's like to be on the ice and to get your teeth knocked out.

LF: And there's a kind of kinesthetic understanding?

RW: Yeah, but at the same time, he has some of the personality of the best possible, the aggressiveness, even though he didn't have the ability. But he has the aggressiveness, and he has the ability to recognize ability because he's tried it himself. At the same time he has some other things. The thing that's always the most interesting to me about Sather is that he has in the past taken people whom other coaches have given up on maybe for some psychological reasons and he actually makes good hockey players out of them, sometimes because of the atmosphere that he creates. That is not something that he would learn necessarily playing hockey himself. So there's more to being an instructor, a really good instructor, than being a good writer.

LF: Are there overlapping qualities?

RW: The ability to recognize, and there's a certain kind of selflessness that's necessary as a teacher. If you are, for example, concerned about your own writing, or if you could never instruct anyone who was potentially a better writer than you were, or who was threatening to you, that would be the saddest situation in the world. Imagine now, there are some writers in this town who were students of mine the first couple of years I was a teacher here, and suppose they have a writers' group. If at every point I found it important to still play the role of instructor as sort of mentor, that would be a total failure. If these former students, on the other hand, come to me occasionally for support for some kind of grant, or send me stories when they get published, that's okay. But there are teachers like that, writing instructors who try to say "No, no, no, that's not the way you should write, you should write this way." And then they make the corrections on the page, and they say, "Okay, this is the way to write a story." They write it for them, so the stories or poems start becoming basically repetitions of their own work. I think that's really poor instruction and that has to be avoided.

LF: What about subjects you don't like?

RW: This is a problem. You know sometimes there are subjects that are so distasteful that you can't appreciate the skill that goes into making them. Over the years, I haven't run into too many of them, but there've been a few. You have to struggle with yourself and over the years I've gotten over some of them; some not. A story, for example, that I found downright blasphemous in a Christian sense, I would find really difficult to deal with. I used to have a fair amount of trouble with gay stories, for example, because I used to find some of those things problematic to talk about, because I felt there was something so wrong-headed about it, but the world has certainly taught us a lot about that. There are personal hangups that some of us have.

LF: You still prefer certain things and don't prefer others?

RW: Sure, and there are certain kinds of stories and ways of story telling that I can deal with a lot better and be more helpful on than other kinds of things. You recognize that over a long time.

LF: Since you have been doing it for a long time, why do you teach?

RW: In Adelaide I talked to a lot of professional writers, people who write totally and do nothing else but write, and they find it, and in many parts of the world writers find it strange that a lot of writers in North America, and especially in Canada are associated with academia is some way or another. For one thing, they don't have creative writing classes at any of the universities. The writers there usually talk about academics as if they were some kind of plague. Australian writers in particular seem to have a terrible attitude about Australian academics. There are almost no Australian writers who are academics, and the Australians are always so stunned by the fact that some of the best academics in Canada are writers like George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch, who give wonderful papers, stunning imaginative papers that are the class of any conference, rather than the dull things that professors give, and yet they're writers. And I got mad, and at one point, when one writer in a joke said, "Yes Professor," to me, I said, "For all you know, I'm teaching your son. Why do you send him to university?" It just made me mad because in one sense my academic position's being derided and at the same time, of course, they're all sending their kids to university because that's where they learn things. So they can say these terrible things about English professors who make a living sort of preying on their work. Well, anyway, how did I get going on this?

LF: I was asking you why you teach?

RW: Oh, why I taught? I know, that's one reason, that's oddly corroborated from another point of view. In Adelaide, I met there, a very fine Japanese-English writer, a man who was born in Japan but who's lived in England since he was five years old. He's in his mid-thirties and has written a couple of very fine novels, and certainly literately is potentially one of the finest writers coming out of England right now. He makes enough money with his writing, so he can just sit at home and write. He said, "I go crazy if I do nothing but write," so he writes T.V. scripts to get out of the house, to have contact with other human beings. I said, "You deal with T.V. producers and directors as a way of contacting human beings?" He said, "Yeah, they're very strange people. But I get out of the house a couple of days of the week, and I interact with someone else." That's one of the major reasons why I teach, because I get in contact with some very bright and interesting young people who give me ideas, and who inform me about worlds that I'll never be in myself because I'm not twenty years old, and I don't know about discos. But when I read their stories and talk to them, I get that flavour of that youthful life that they're exploring and growing up in. I'd much rather deal with those kinds of people and the few people that I have to here, or that I encounter who are my friends, because at least they're superbly intelligent and they know a lot of things about a lot of odd stuff, and I can ask them for information. We can have the most arcane discussions about anything at all which they may be experts on, and which, is exciting and interesting for at least a little while, rather than with these twisted types who are only interested in making money. Even if I would retire from this job, one of the reasons I would not want to just write and sit in my own head--although sometimes for a couple of years at a stretch that's a good thing to do-- is that I do want to stay in touch with what's vital and alive with other human beings. And teaching is one of the best ways to do it--at the same time they pay you superbly so you don't have to worry about writing to the market, which is important. The kind of thing that this Japanese writer is doing is pretty rare, and at the same time his demands are not that great, and he's had a superb response in terms of being translated into ten or twelve different languages, so he's getting a good income from that. I can see that at some point or another he may not, and then he will be required to write more things that can be sold more commercially. I don't have to worry about that.

LF: You have almost total writing freedom?

RW: Yeah, and I get enough free time to do that; the university has been very good to me about it. I've always been granted every sabbatical I've ever asked for and release time or free time whenever I ask for it. They've never denied me as long as I ask within the parameters of the rules. So I can't complain about that at all.

LF: Do you enjoy teaching?

RW: Yes, there's an enjoyment about it. Although there's some drudgery too. I mean you have to be professional about it; you show up in class; you have your work done, and you have your assignments done. If you expect them to be there on the deadlines, you have to meet the deadlines yourself. Otherwise it's not fair. Once the respect goes, you're gone. Once you get people angry or feel they're jilted or they're not getting their money's worth, it's not good.

LF: Have you changed your teaching over time?

RW: Yes. Some people who watch me now say I'm much gentler. Aritha, for one, says, "You used to be a lot harder than that, what are you doing?" And I say, "You just don't remember." No, I think it probably changes over the years.

LF: A little more accepting?

RW: Maybe? But with other things, more intolerant, or impatient, at least, with hackneyed ways of looking at the world. It's amazing, but one of the things you see in these classes is that the kind of standard free enterprise notions that basically our world runs on, most of these students don't have. They really are critical of the society in which they live, although they're often critical in typical ways. So that they've never thought about the fur boycott until you start talking about the effect it has on native peoples in Canada, and then they start getting clued in on it. They generally are very alert about what's going on in the world, and what things to criticize. And that's why it's interesting reading their stories because they try to imagine. If I just sat in the library reading the greats, which is what I could do....

LF: You'd lose vitality?

RW: Yeah, and the energy of living people. I've never had very much to do with their personal lives and never will I suppose.

LF: No reason to?

RW: Well, some people do. They make their students their lives. I suppose partly because I've had a number of other lives to live, and academia is only one, I haven't.

LF: Do you have a metaphor for yourself as teacher?

RW: I don't know. Coach, I suppose. Because at a certain point you don't do very much, you don't say very many specific things. You just say, "Yes yes, go ahead and do it." You talk about larger things, but the problems are all solved basically by the writers themselves.

LF: "Better and better, keep writing."

RW: Yeah. Sometimes you have to do really drastic things. Just a couple of M.A. theses ago this person had written a novel and was going on for 500 pages. So I just said, "Okay, this is no good. This is just getting bigger and bigger and bigger. It has no shape any more from what you began with. You have to start all over again." And then we discussed, "Can you take this part? What is the most interesting story for you?" So you talk to the student, and to her credit, she did it. It took her another year, and she graduated, and now it's been accepted by a publisher in eastern Canada. She's got to do one more work over with an editor, but basically they've accepted the novel. Sometimes you have to do some pretty drastic things with people. But, presumably if that hadn't been done, no one would have ever published it. But it had a lot of good stuff in it and had no focus. It had no structure. But generally speaking, you don't have to do anything as drastic as that. People get it done themselves, and you stand on the sidelines and keep reading and say, "Yes yes yes, what's this? I can't follow this here. But basically go ahead, go ahead, go ahead, don't stop."

LF: What advice would you give teachers of writing in the school system?

RW: Teachers should give more practice in actual writing, and at a certain point not be too hung up about the grammatical and mechanical mistakes the students make. To give the students more practice in writing language which is different from the practice of talking language. Using words and literally writing them and seeing what effect they have when they get sort of caught and set on the paper is still the way we work with them, even with screens or whatever. I've got this machine here too, but even so, it's still the word on the screen. This is one of the reasons why we don't read it aloud; there is a certain horrifying impersonality about the printed word.

LF: It's disembodied?

RW: Yeah, it's there as a word, it's there as a sound, it's there as a cluster of sounds. To control, as it were, the emotional or intellectual response of our readers is much more difficult under such conditions of the cold word which is the word on the page.

LF: And you have to have practice all the way through the school system doing that?

RW: More practice, yes, more practice of writing. I know it just multiplies the paper that the teachers have to deal with, but you have to. Students have to know you read it, maybe not mark it so much as just read it, and say, "Yes, write some more, write some more, write some more."

But I do know that one of the best things I've discovered about teaching is the fact that sometimes you know you're going to have to do a really heavy job on somebody's work. If it can be done by someone else in the class it relieves you of always being the hatchet man. Although that, of course, is essential, sometimes. But if it can be done in the context of a number of people taking this element and this element and this element until the whole thing is covered but not with one great ax chopping it apart, I think it's better for them. I think a lot of teachers in grade school are the authority and the arbiter of everything, so they become picayunish. It's the centipede that's told how do you walk and then can't figure it out, because which leg do I move first, you know. The student becomes constipated. He doesn't know which leg to move first, and so he says nothing. All he sees instantly are problems with every word he puts on the page.

LF: It's wrong before you can get it down. How can you best prepare writing teachers?

RW: I think all writing teachers should be forced to try and write themselves, practise writing themselves, so preferably they should continue to do that.

LF: So write themselves, and as you said before, read to keep current?

RW: Yeah for sure, for sure.

LF: Should they invite students to read?

RW: But read things that are appropriate to their level. In Canada there are incredibly fine writers for children and young adult writers right now. I was reading Cora Taylor, who's a very fine writer. There's an interesting case, because she was in a whole series of classes with me and she was always having trouble, and one of the reasons she was having trouble was because she was trying to write adult stories which is something she discovered on her own after she got through all my classes. She recast a whole story she'd been struggling with me, as a story to be aimed at children say 13, 14, 15, and, lo and behold, it won a library award for that year. So students may be in the wrong, either in the wrong genre--sometimes they work better as dramatists than they do as short story writers--or they're writing for a different age reader or something like that, and that's where suddenly the breakthrough comes. I didn't help her to do any of this. I didn't tell her to try writing for young adults, not as far as I remember. That was a thing she discovered on her own. But at the same time, she'd been through at least three classes of pretty intense discussion about the kinds of things she's writing and she's got a very good sense of what a story's about. It was there. Everybody always recognized that these were wonderful stories, but there was always something wrong with them. There's something really story-ish that's really good here. A human situation that's great. But there was always a terrible uneasiness about what was actually coming out.

LF: Anything else about teaching writing you want to say?

RW: After two hours, I don't feel particularly wise. Let's just leave it at that. Get your thesis done.

Chapter 4 - William D. Valgardson

Bill Valgardson was born in Gimli, Manitoba, in 1939 and has written a great deal about the Icelandic community he knew well as a young child. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts from United College in Winnipeg, a Bachelor of Education from the University of Manitoba, and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa.

Before assuming his position with the University of Victoria, British Columbia, in 1974, he taught high school for six years in Manitoba, and from 1970-1974 was assistant professor at Cottey College in Montana.

He writes poetry, short stories, television and radio scripts, and novels. His published works include Bloodflowers (1973), God is Not a Fish Inspector (1975), Red Dust (1978), Gentle Sinners (1980), and In the Cutting Shed (1981).

Valgardson's works have appeared in The Canadian Journal of Fiction, Fiddlehead, Ontario Review, Windsor Review, and The Queen's Quarterly. In 1971, a story of his was on the list of American Best Short Stories and also won the President's Medal for Fiction. He won the CBC Annual Fiction Prize in 1980, and Books in Canada listed Gentle Sinners as Best First Novel in 1980.

Professor Valgardson resides in Victoria and spends some of his time sketching, climbing, folk dancing, and keeping a dream journal when he isn't teaching or writing.

W.D. Valgardson Interview Conditions

In response to the letter of request for an interview, Bill Valgardson promptly sent back a handwritten note, in ball-point pen, which said: "Sure, be glad to help out." The date of April 23, 1987 was settled by a second exchange of correspondence. From Vancouver I called the author at his office number at University of Victoria to arrange the exact time for the following day and was informed that he was absent from work, at home recovering from major surgery just a few days before. I left my number with the secretary certain that the planned conversation would not be possible, but he returned the call, saying, "Come on over about eleven tomorrow morning," and gave me his home address.

Next morning, by racing across ferry traffic lines, my sister and I managed to be in the last car on the 8:00 a.m. ferry, bound for Schwartz Bay on the Island. I was on time, two recorders and questions in hand. I rapped gently on the front porch screen door at his house off Quadra Street and a voice hollered from inside, "Hi, come on in."

We introduced ourselves and while I set up equipment, Bill made tea and brought a breakfast tray of eccles cakes (with currents) and other baked goods. Initial awkwardness dissipated within minutes and I felt as though I'd known him a very long time, joking and agreeing often.

Because I was on the Island only one day and Bill was still quite weak from his hospital experience, we decided to do both sets of questions at the same sitting and the complete interview lasted about three hours. He spoke quickly and included many anecdotes at the beginning, answering the questions fully and often by way of example. After a couple of hours he began to tire, having talked continuously and intensely, and by the middle of the second set of questions was more succinct and direct in his responses. When we finished, he was pale and quite exhausted, but calm and very encouraging about the project.

W.D. Valgardson Writing Interview April 23, 1987

LF: When did you start writing?

WDV: I can tell you exactly. 1960. Twenty years old. I wasn't a joiner; I didn't belong to anything, but I went to a creative writing club and they were super good, very protective of all of us. There was a certain sense of identity. It was a big change for me, because I was a teenager who wore a black leather jacket with an eagle on the back and a motorcycle cap. I sat in the back of the classroom in high school and dared anyone to try to teach me anything. When I got to college, everybody was out on the field running and I was still trying to dig my way out of a hole. I didn't know it at the time, but discovering there was a great writing club and going to that had a profound influence. Imagine if I'd gone to any political clubs. Lloyd Axworthy was a classmate of mine for three years.

LF: He joined the political club?

WDV: Yes, United College was a really interesting place with top-notch students, really good professors.

LF: When you were there then, did you decide "Okay, this is it; I'm just going to do it?"

WDV: No, not at all, I just was trying to write a sonnet and poems. I didn't know what I was doing, didn't know any grammar or punctuation, and I couldn't spell. I was tricky. I knew things like if you write poems, you can write short phrases and clauses, do free verse, and keep it really tight.

At the workshops here, it is always the same thing. People in poetry always do better than the people in fiction, and the people in fiction do better than the people in drama. Acceptable poetry is much easier to write than acceptable fiction. Fiction is long and requires a lot more craft. You can't get by on two minutes inspiration in a novel.

LF: After you left the college, what led you to more writing, or have you always just written "on the side"?

WDV: I've always just written "on the side"; I've always had a full-time job. I married one of the girls in the creative writing class by the end of the third year. At age 21, all you want to do is take somebody's clothes off. Ah, sex. You can't see straight for it. She was in the club, writing. She was literary, read a lot. Her mother was at the university; her father had been poet who'd been shot down by the Germans during the war.

I stayed in the creative club and passed all my courses for the first time. I was really enamoured of economics, but I was looking for a job. I hadn't found anything after three or four tries--Bank of Montreal, Coca Cola, business--and one day I was walking down the street with the Winnipeg Press open looking for jobs. Who did I bump into but my superintendent of schools for the district where I lived in Gimli. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Looking for a job." He said, "Got your B.A.?" I said, "Yeah." In those days you couldn't get teachers. They would hire anybody and salaries were very good--thirty-nine hundred dollars that year. In those days--that is the best teachers have ever been paid. So I became a teacher and went off to Riverton where I taught High School that year, and loved it. That's where I learned to write English. I learned composition because I had to teach it; I learned grammar and punctuation because I had to teach it. Wonderful. I wrote in the evenings and on weekends.

LF: When you started writing, what sort of reward was there?

WDV: Just self-expression. That's it. There is just some kind of drive to create something of one's own as opposed to academic work. It's interesting to see the creative writing students in our department, for example, as opposed to the people that go to the English department, or the people who come to us from the English department who are very frustrated because they want to write their own poetry, fiction, drama. They want to create as opposed to analyze or study. There is nothing wrong with either one; we need them both, but there are obviously very different personalities.

LF: Has the reward in writing changed for you?

WDV: No. I earned sixteen thousand dollars this year writing, which in Canada is an amazing amount of money. Last year I probably made seventeen thousand. The best year I've ever had, I made twenty thousand. People have said to me, "Why don't you quit teaching and just write?" I said, "Because that saturates the market." I think if I wrote full-time I really wouldn't do much better. I mean you can only sell so many radio dramas to CBC. If you produce one one-hour drama a year for CBC at thirty-eight hundred dollars for it, and they run it a third time for which you get another nineteen hundred, you get 5700 dollars for a one-hour play. The chances of your getting a second play to do for the CBC in any given year are very small.

LF: People often say, "If only I had the time, I could do all this great stuff." Is that true?

WDV: Yes, I could. If I'd been wise enough to marry somebody rich who wanted to do something great for Canadian literature, I'm sure I would have been writing at least a novel a year. Out of the novel a year, maybe I would have gotten some hits. Aritha van Herk writes her novel and wins the Seal Book Award. She gets fifty thousand dollars and from then on nobody wants to give her a hand because everybody says, "You're rich." The fact of the matter is that lots of people earn fifty thousand dollars. When you pay the income tax on it, it's spent. Even if you husband it very carefully, at the end of two years, you've no money. You've got to have a best selling novel every year. People say to me, "Well, grants." And I say, "Well, sure, grants are fine" and I recommend people for grants and all that kind of thing. I am glad the Canada Council is there, but personally I would rather have a full-time job. Everybody has to make a compromise and this is the one that leaves me with the most dignity and self-respect. Other people make other choices.

LF: The other thing is, you are involved with a variety of things and you've got a lot more going on in your head.

WDV: What I recommend to my students when they come and say things like "I want be in creative writing, because I'm going to teach creative writing and it's going to be great" is "No, if you want to write, go get a job completely separate from creative writing." If I had to do it again, I would do a degree in math, probably try to get a Ph.D. in something like math, physics, or chemistry, but something that would be completely separate. Law actually would be better; law would be excellent.

LF: So that you have two separate realities?

WDV: Yeah, yeah. Two separate realities, because if you spend all your time at workshops which are very intense, personal, emotional, lots of conflict and you're always reading other people's manuscripts, the last thing you want to do when you come home at night is to write. You're killed by it. I come home every day and what I want to do is go dancing.

LF: I have heard writers say they like to teach because it sparks things--

WDV: No, it doesn't. Kills you. And there is nothing to write about on campus. Campus is a black hole; campus is dead zone. The only thing you could write about out of campus is campus politics, and that's garbage. Robertson Davies wrote a good book, but the fact of the matter is that every publishing house in North America constantly is rejecting all these damn books by professors who want to write about campus politics. Bunch of crap.

LF: Did you go back then and get other education?

WDV: Yes, after I taught at Riverton for a year, I went to the Faculty of Education--total waste of a year of mine--got my teaching certificate and taught high school for a number of years all over Manitoba. In summers, I got my B.Ed, but did a B.A. first and then later did two years of education. I got my B.Ed. because I figured if I was going to be in teaching high school, I sure as hell won't stay in the classroom. I was going to be a principal or superintendent, something, anything. I couldn't do this forever; I could see what was happening. The burial rates were terrible, so I got a B. Ed. and then got a chance to go to Iowa to do a Master of Fine Arts. I went from '67-'69. Best two years of my life.

LF: Good people there?

WDV: Good people there, yeah. George Starbuck, Marvin Bell, William Price Fox, Robert Kruger, Benivido Santos (Philippino writer--very good) Good people.

LF: Did you take creative writing classes?

WDV: Yes, it's a big graduate school. One hundred and twenty people. Just a big graduate school in creative writing. Two years.

LF: Do those experiences still inform your work?

WDV: Oh, you bet. I don't go back to those individuals, but the things they taught me are the things that I teach in my workshops and the things I use in my writing.

LF: Like what?

WDV: Where to start a story, how, where to end a story, what is needed for the writer, as opposed to what is needed for the reader.

LF: Useful craft instruction?

WDV: Oh, incredibly useful craft stuff. Stuff that I've tried for years and years to teach myself and just got frustrated. They taught me enough in the first class I could have gone home then and worked as a writer.

LF: What went on there and why was that so different than what goes on so much of the time? I am wondering what the difference is between your experience at teacher education training and that creative writing. Is it content, too?

WDV: No, it's just quality of instructors. The quality of instructors in Faculty of Education, I remember, was so low, it was absolutely appalling. I mean those people couldn't function in a real academic department.

LF: [Nervous laughter]

WDV: No, I'm being kind to them; I could say much worse. They worried about things like hauling you aside and saying you weren't wearing the right kind of tie, not about whether you could teach or not. They were scum, low I.Q.'s, and none of them could survive in an English department. They didn't teach me a thing.

LF: And the people teaching you in Iowa, were they masters of their own craft?

WDV: You bet, they were professional writers, and they didn't avoid things. The thing in the faculty of education that was so bad is nobody ever talked about anything real. The real problems that we were going to face outside university classrooms, nobody ever had the guts to talk about. Discipline, illiteracy--they were coward. There was no cowardice in the creative writing department.

LF: Was their policy to meet things head on?

WDV: Meet it head on.

LF: Are there other, informal things that you did other than writing classes after you finished teacher education or after Iowa?

WDV: Between leaving United College in '61 and going to Iowa in '67, you bet. I did everything I could; for example, I went and got copies of books of short stories by writers I admired and sat down and did my best to analyze their craft. I didn't know where to go. Most books on writing are just dreadful, just horrible. What I did was sit down with my two books of stories by John Updike, and go through them and say, "I'll try to teach myself one thing; for instance, 'How does John Updike introduce his characters?'"

LF: So you take the stories themselves and look at the parts and how they fit together?

WDV: Yes, break them all up. I use that same technique I developed for teaching literature in the classroom, which has been successful. You can use it for anything; I use it for teaching Shakespeare. I diagram everything. I teach two structure courses the traditional and the experimental short story and I use the technique I developed for myself. I buy wall paper that's on sale, not the glueback type, in scrolls and put it up on the wall and diagram a story vertically, and horizontally.

LF: You do that for yourself when you are writing?

WDV: Yeah, oh yeah.

LF: That way if you run into "snags" you can fix them?

WDV: Yeah, absolutely. I always do the plot summary.

LF: Have you changed the way you write over the years?

WDV: I don't think I've changed my genre. I am not young as I was; I'm not passionate as I was. I suffer from all that is part of being middle-aged. You're very rational when you're young, but the upside of that is that you're also very passionate. You write out of your guts in a way and it doesn't matter if you're right or wrong. All that matters is that you're doing it. Now I'm too intellectual. Now I know too much in a sense. It's harder to--I feel like a Buddhist monk a lot of the time.

LF: Passive and observant?

WDV: Yeah, yeah.

LF: Why is that? Does that come out of a continual evaluating?

WDV: Incredible self-analysis. A decade long of intense attempt to understand Jung, which is an improvement permeating myself.

LF: You've learned to recall your shadow?

WDV: Yes, yes.

LF: Now, there's nothing to do?

WDV: Oh, no, I don't think it's that, but I understand why at a certain time in some societies, you give everything up and you go off and become a monk to spend the rest of your life in thought and prayer and meditation. When you're young, you've got all this emotion and do a lot of injustices. My marriage went down the tube five years ago. If that had happened to me when I was twenty to thirty, it would have been blood and bone. It would have been like war. Now, it's rather an understanding that people have the right to make choices and to remake them. They have the right to be themselves. You can love someone without wanting to live with them. After we split up, my wife said to me, "You know, I changed my will, but I left you as the executor because I know you're the one person I can trust." When I was in the hospital, she came to the hospital and brought me some flowers and spent a wonderful two hours with me. If she were in trouble, it wouldn't matter where she was, anywhere on the earth, I'd just simply get on a plane, or get in the car and go and help her. But we don't want to live together. That's not possible.

You've got to hate somebody, you've got to fight with somebody because you don't want--Men kill women all the time because women say, "I don't want to live with you." They're crazy, I mean they're nuts. Th[illegible] literally are crazy. But when you become yourself, when you have that self-realization, you don't have to have others; you are you. You don't have to be a parasite; you don't even have to be symbiotic. You can live and prosper; you can want but don't have to have. WOW. All of a sudden there is the problem of what you are going to write. In my early work, I wrote about hatred and greed and lust. Now what do I write about?

LF: What do you write about now?

WDV: I don't know. Well, I've never known what I'm going to write about. I never write to confirm what I know. That's propaganda; it's a waste of time if the answers are already there. I always write to discover. I dreamt the scene of the boy standing in the rain in *Gentle Sinners*. It was a very powerful dream. I have kept dream diaries for a decade and the dream stayed with me and I began to write for three years. I didn't know what was coming. What kept me going was exploration.

LF: You just sit down and do it? Do you have a time for yourself?

WDV: I wrote nearly all of *Gentle Sinners* in a laundromat because that was the time I had. That was when I did book-keeping. Great. White noise while the machine is going. People don't bother you. You get a table, a bottle of coke, and sit there. Laundry can take two hours. I just write longhand. Now I've got a computer hooked up to the main frame at the university and I've been doing a lot of composing. Recently the things that I've written are all written directly on the computer.

LF: Do you find that the computer saves you time?

WDV: I think that a lot of time when I used to think I was writing what I was really doing was copying or re-typing. Now I seem to be writing less. I know I'm writing less anyway, because of a lot of other things in my life, but a lot of it was, in a sense, fake time because if you made a mistake, you had to re-type the page. On a computer you just make changes.

LF: What took you four hours to write before, now takes half an hour?

WDV: Yes, especially in the rewriting. I'm an incredible rewriter. I do thirty to forty drafts.

LF: Did you have any mentors when you were young?

WDV: No, I wish I had. It would have made a difference, for me. The closest thing I had to a mentor was a judge who was very influential in the Icelandic community in Winnipeg. He spotted me and we started doing things. For example, I got on the board of the Icelandic Canadian Magazine. I wasn't even swift enough, sophisticated enough to understand what he was doing. I was explaining that incident to my son the other day. I said, "It would have been helpful if people wouldn't have assumed that I knew what was going on." Somebody could had taken me aside and said, "Hey, Bill, you understand that this guy is not just doing this to be--he's actually trying to accomplish something and this is your opportunity to learn these things."

LF: Do you think it becomes too late to have a mentor?

WDV: No, I don't think so. I guess at seventy you could find a guru.

LF: Can you learn to be your own mentor, in a sense?

WDV: It's very hard to do it for yourself, not to have somebody--now I'm not talking here about political help, although that's always helpful. I'm not even talking about money or power. Those are always helpful and you should never turn them down if you get them without too many compromises. I have a superb friend who is an absolutely marvellous psychiatrist. I don't know him professionally; I know him socially but I am utterly fascinated by him because he is a brilliant man. He knows so much; he is just so educated. He's fascinated with me because he regards me as being one of the great Canadian writers.

LF: So you can push each other's heads?

WDV: Yes, we talk of real things. There's no debriefing; when we meet, it's like [strong gutteral "argh!"] we really trust and like each other.

LF: Is he somebody you could trust enough to talk, if not about content, about process?

WDV: He asks me questions about creativity and all that kind of thing. I ask him all kinds of things about the human soul, because he sees into everyone's heart of darkness.

LF: Is that what you discover when you are writing?

WDV: No. it's not just that. I used to be much more judgemental and so the stories were very hard. I was very Lutheren in those stories.

LF: Have you a fundamentalist background?

WDV: Yes. Fundamental Lutheren. I was going to become a Lutheren minister when I was a teenager. I was very active, head of the youth.

LF: Is your capacity to be good also your other capacity?

WDV: Yes. There's a tremendous amount of cruelty in the fundamental Christian religion. Very, very cruel.

LF: I was raised in a fundamentalist religion.

WDV: You never escape it.

LF: Are you done with that in your writing?

WDV: I don't think so, but I would now bring a lot more understanding so maybe in a way people won't enjoy the stories anymore as much, because they aren't as simple or clear. I have a feeling now when I write something, it's likely to be more complex, but more understanding, more humane. I'm not convinced that makes better drama.

LF: May Sarton talks about past not being a static thing at all, and so I suppose if it always changes there would always be a new way to write about it.

WDV: Oh, of course.

LF: But Viktor Frankl says, "No, past is static and historical; there it is."

WDV: Maybe the facts are, on April 7, 1914, but memory forgets, memory edits. In Joyce Carol Oates' story "The Betrayed House of Correction," the girls sit and sit and sit. We always make ourselves look better in our anecdotes. Even if we don't do it dishonestly, there's always editing, there's always the highlighting, there's always the things you leave out. I tell my students that in terms of point of view. If I tell them an anecdote and I tell a priest and a child and my mother, each telling will be different, because of the receptor. What students don't understand because they write for themselves is that all communication is just as much controlled by who the listener is, as by the teller.

LF: There's a double reframing going on all the time?

WDV: Of course.

LF: Is that what happens for you in discovery in a story?

WDV: I guess it's really a kind of epiphany. What happens for me is I'll do all the first draft which is all right out of the unconscious. The words are just simply poured down and poured down; you get it down and it comes like in clumps of gold. But raw. And like chunks of rock. Then you've got to make decisions. I don't really know what I'm doing until I get enough material down that I can discover a theme in there. For me it's always theme. And then, I realize, oh, that's why I'm saying this. Until I make that decision, I can't make any editing decisions, because I don't know on what basis to edit out something.

LF: When you describe that process I get images of Michaelangelo's half-finished sculptures; is that what you mean?

WDV: Yes.

LF: That is also like Peter Elbow's stuff, where you build a block of words and then chip the excess away.

WDV: Exactly. I always think of the Eskimos. You get a piece of soapstone. You don't say "You will be...." Instead, you put it on the shelf and turn it and turn it and live with it for months until you see what's there and then just knock away the parts that don't fit.

LF: That's really almost beyond language, isn't it?

WDV: Well, I don't think in language. I think in images and then I actually have to translate into language. And I love it. I wouldn't want it to be any other way. I assume some people actually think in language. [Laughter]

LF: Those ways of thinking are dealt with in a little book called The Creative Process where Einstein talks about not thinking in words, but images. They also show letters from Mozart who "thought" out his music in holistic blocks and then just translated that in dots on paper, perfect the first time around. Beethoven, on the other hand, just "free-noted" from his unconscious into a block of notes and then pared and sculpted them down afterward. So for you, writing is a translation from image into meaning?

WDV: Yes, image into meaning.

LF: Into other meaning for other people?

WDV: That's right. For example, Bill Kinsella's wife said "I'd love to have two weeks with Valgardson's dream diaries." And I said, "Anne, they probably wouldn't be that interesting simply because the symbolism and imagery in my dreams are so personal that they probably don't mean anything to anybody else." First of all in your dreams, you have to go back through the day and look at it and say, "Okay, what happened in the last 24 hours" and lay all those things that are obviously connected. Then ask objectively, "Which of these is true?" which only I can do. Then say, "Subjectively, which of this is true, what does it mean?" By the time you've done that, other people would be lost. Poems are the most personal of all genres. It is interesting to take something that personal and try to objectify it so that it's communicable.

LF: Privacy. Is that a problem?

WDV: Always has been. Nobody believes it's important, no matter what they say; they all lie.

LF: If you tell them you are writing from 10 to 12, people phone or show up between 10 and 12?

WDV: Yeah, and it's just everything's more important. If I was writing movie scripts and making 250,000 dollars a year, then they wouldn't do it. Because in our society if you make money at it, it's important; if you don't make money at it, it's not important. No matter how seriously you take your artistic work, it's just a hobby if you don't make a living at it.

LF: Do you have a sense of wanting to write more now and getting more irritable or less patient with people who interrupt?

WDV: Yeah, well, I'm cooler about it now. I can handle it better now. I find it easier to be rude. I'm not rude, but self-protective.

LF: More assertive?

WDV: I'm much better at being assertive. For example, I resigned the chairmanship of the department. I'm better able now in middle age to put my house in order, to set my priorities. I'd love to win the 649 [lottery]. I'd quit my job tomorrow and build a log cabin out at Goldstream.

LF: When you're writing is it a time when you don't wish you were doing anything else?

WDV: Oh you bet, absolutely. I always feel that everything else I do is really a waste of time. You have to earn a living to pay the mortgage, and pay the car payments, but it's a waste of time.

LF: It's an aside?

WDV: Yes, there are lots of other people who can do this daily maintainence stuff, who aren't as talented. That's not putting them down; it's just true.

LF: Can you talk a little bit about your own relationship with language? Have you always had an affinity for words and word play?

WDV: I love word play, love irony, word games. When I was a kid living and growing up in Gimli, I was smaller than everybody. They were big `galoots' who beat me up. All big Ukrainians. What I learned is that I could fight with my tongue. I could cut them up into little tiny pieces. People got so they didn't bother me.

LF: That's an enormous sense of power for a kid.

WDV: Tremendous power.

LF: Are words still an empowering tool for you?

WDV: Yes, and joy, pleasure, wonderful.

LF: Is it a way for you to connect with the world?

WDV: Yes. Language itself is just a wonderful tool for flowers.

LF: So you see yourself as a gardener of language?

WDV: I like flowers. Flowers are a joy, colour, beauty, form, delight. Maybe if I was making a National Film Board cartoon about my writing, I would be sitting writing with a pen with flowers coming out [motions them wafting up].

LF: Are you ever afraid to write anything?

WDV: Sure. Now and again. Most people in creative writing classes are afraid that if they write about Aunt Sally, she'll recognize it and she will never speak to them again. I don't worry about that. I have discovered, of course, that you write such a little, tiny bit of someone, that if you don't call them by their name, people think they recognize themselves, but they are never write.

LF: They ask, "Is that me in there?" and you haven't even thought about them?

WDV: Yes.

LF: Do you ever get to the point where you begin to discover something you don't necessarily want to?

WDV: Yes, and it's very painful. Part of my growth has been discovering that all my characters exist from me. I am capable of all these things, and that's terrifying, until I realize of course that I don't have to do things.

LF: You do have control. You can tell your shadow to heel.

WDV: Yes, I don't have to do them. That's very painful, because if you're brought up in a fundamentalist church, you're guilty for thought, word, and deed. Those people in those churches are not great philosophers; they're not even great thinkers. The education process of the difference between fantasy and thought is a long one before you finally break free of that kind of thing.

LF: You think we have to look at the religious upbringing as a source of fear? Or old vestigal conscious awareness?

WDV: Yes, guilt and sometimes, just fear. You suddenly realize something and you think, "Oh I don't want to know that about me. I'm not like that. Don't tell me I'm like that."

LF: Do you break through it?

WDV: Yes. Often the dreams tell you things you really don't want to know, not just that they tell you about you but they often tell you very painful things about other people. For example, in literature there's text and subtext. The trouble with most people when they begin to write is they only understand text. They don't understand that the real story is always in the subtext. The arranging of the subtext is a far more complex and difficult matter than arranging of the text. Depending on what kind of story you're constructing, the success of the theme and the epiphany is going to lie in the ordering of the subtext. That means that you have got to understand in tremendous detail what things mean.

LF: You've got to be just hovering at tacit level the whole time.

WDV: Yes. Let's say you buy a new truck, and you're going to put a canopy on the truck. A good friend comes over and volunteers to help you drill the holes, and then screws it up, three times. You know they're not incompetent and they're not doing it deliberately or consciously. What you realize is that they're really jealous that you bought a new truck. That hurts. You don't want to know that.

LF: The trick in the writing is to make what's subconscious or unconscious conscious for the reader?

WDV: Possibly. Accessible. Possibly conscious to the intelligent reader.

LF: And fear interferes?

WDV: It can. Because it hurts so much. Because you don't want to know this. It's very hard to know things. And sometimes, you want to shut your mind off.

LF: Is that still true for you?

WDV: Yes. When I'm involved or when I care for people. For instance, when I see a couple, and I like both of them, and I like them being together and I like them being with me, and their body language tells me that their relationship is ending, but they don't know it yet, that hurts me.

LF: Because you can't act, the observing becomes painful?

WDV: Yes. You see, but you cannot intervene.

LF: Earlier, you mentioned that you've become more rational and more academic in your thinking. That you're more passive in some ways in terms of acting on the world, more withdrawing or reclusive. Could it be that the cost is that the passion is gone because you understand it?

WDV: Life is much simpler if you can use very simple answers.

LF: Is there fear at the point you become aware of painful knowledge when you write?

WDV: I don't think so. No. I think that there's an incredible joy in understanding. It depends on what you believe. I believe that we're alive before we're born. I don't just believe that, I know it. We don't come from nothing; we come from life to life. We're here to learn as much as possible, to know as much as possible, and to develop whatever is in us. To me death is another kind of birth. We go from life, to life, to life. I'm fairly confident that life is a sort of passage. So there's a kind of tremendous joy in learning, in understanding something I didn't understand before, and that carries you through the pain of knowing.

LF: Do you think about other people when you're writing?

WDV: Yes, but only in a general way. When I first began to write and publish, somebody asked me who did I want to read my work? I said spontaneously, "I want to write stories that the fisherman in Gimli will pick up and read and when I go home in the summer can say, 'Gee I read your story Bill and I really enjoyed it.'" But I also want my former professors whom I admired in the English department to pick them up and say to me when I walk into the college, "Good story, good story." I've got a theory about what I call the whole story. I see four distinct audiences for stories among the reading public and those are defined not by the story, but by the reading ability of the audience. There's a big audience, a big circle saying, "Wow wow, what a story, wow," things happen, you know there's plot." A smaller audience is saying, "Well, yes, the plot was interesting, but wow I'll never forget the characters." At the third level, very small, people say, "The plot's interesting, Bill, and the characters are, and the theme." Then a fourth group notices the little tiny things that kind of pinch in the centre, what you're doing with the language and the rhythm and sound and image.

LF: Have you got such readers?

WDV: Yes, sure, university professors. They have to be. They've got to be as smart and educated as I am in my field.

LF: How do you know when to let go of a piece?

WDV: I don't know. That's a funny kind of thing. It's very hard to answer. My instinct. It's like learning to pitch a baseball. You just practise and practise until you know that you're going to get a strike. You feel it go smoothly. Or like bowling, you know when the ball leaves your hand that you've got a strike. That's just practice, instinct. It's instinct, but it's instinct developed.

LF: Do you have anyone else you rely on before it reaches published stage?

WDV: No.

LF: You do your own editing?

WDV: Yes. I break every story down into scenes, put it on a diagram, run it through on the horizontal scales. I mean the scenes are vertical; the point of view, character, and setting on the horizontal scale. I check what their dramatic function is in the scene.

LF: Do you think that writing for drama at CBC has helped?

WDV: No, that's how I taught myself to write in the beginning.

LF: You've always diagrammed your stories?

WDV: Yes. That's why it made the shift over to writing drama so easy because I was already doing it. I'm sure it works the other way. I have learned a lot from writing radio drama, but that's not where it was initiated.

LF: Have you got best pieces and worst pieces for yourself, things that you really delight in?

WDV: My most undervalued story is "Brothers." It's the one about the guy who comes to a fish camp, a dissolute English man in the life of the kids. He's using his wife to prostitute for cigarettes and he tries to do the same with his fourteen- year-old daughter in order to get the camp owner to like her. The kid's dying of pneumonia. I just think it's a finely crafted story. "Bloodflowers" got a lot of good publicity. That took me forty drafts and three months to write. "God is not a Fish Inspector" has got a tremendous response. "Saturday Climbing" based on Val my daughter and myself--most stuff isn't based on anything but in that case it was based on my daughter. I'm very fortunate. Nearly all my stories have been very favourably received, admired. I'm always a bit amazed that after fifteen years Bloodflowers is still in print.

LF: Do you ever throw anything out?

WDV: I burn about nine out of ten of the stories I write.

LF: Burn them?

WDV: Or I used to in the past. For many years I went through a whole thing where I had this huge inflated ego. You see it as humility, but then you realize later it's not. What I'd do is write a story and send it to the New Yorker and they'd reject it and I'd burn it. If it wasn't good enough for the New Yorker, it wasn't good enough to collect. I did that for about a year and a half. I stopped doing it with "Bloodflowers". They kept it for about fourteen weeks, and then I got this little note back. But I'd come to my senses about it. I sent it to The Tamarack Review. Now I'm past that kind of madness, that ego.

I keep things sometimes for a long time, like the story "Skald." That took me three years to write. I didn't sit for three years, but I'd work on it, put it in a drawer, go away. I couldn't get it comfortable because everything I wrote was in the third person. Then I sat down and read a story by Alice Munro that was in the first person and suddenly it clicked. After three years of trying, I put it in the first person and I was fine.

LF: Do you learn from the goof ups, the things that won't work?

WDV: Absolutely. If the stories are perfect, what's the point? All the stories that are really good I spend five minutes on and there's nothing more to talk about.

LF: Can you identify social or political things that influence your writing? Clearly the religious thing has.

WDV: Political? I had Walter Young as a professor in a college. It was his first year of teaching and he taught me all about the Winnipeg General Strike. That gave me a new view of the way life works. My grandfather was a labourer on the railway and so it allowed me to understand the exploitation of people when they came to Canada. My stories show I have very little sympathy for capitalism. I'm a strong supporter of what in B.C. are 'communist' institutions like Medicare, old age pensions, welfare for people who can't work because they've had heart attacks. My big disappointment with the National Film Board was they didn't film "Capital" the way it's written. It would have had some very tough things to say about certain kinds of capitalism.

I'm a capitalist in the sense that I believe you have to have incentives, a chance for people to make a profit. People should have the right to have their own businesses and free enterprise. But I don't think the reason people exist on the earth is just to be able to exploit each other. One thing I would like: I wish that I could write the kind of stories that would make politicians tremble at the prospect that another story was coming out. I wish I had the same kind of ability to write fiction in the way that would cause the same kind of unrest and unhappiness among politicians in Canada as Solzhenytsin caused in the USSR.

LF: Where people are forced to consider what they're doing?

WDV: Yes. But Canadians don't write about politics seriously. Bad manners is the ultimate sin in Canada.

LF: Have you got things in mind that you want to write or do you simply defer any writing now?

WDV: No. I wrote that book of poems. I spent six months on that. And a Books in Canada reviewer thought it was great. The review in the Globe and Mail thought it was a disaster which is good for me, two people like that totally disagreeing. It must have some value. I'm happy with it. I've changed very much.

One of the things I've come to terms with is that I'm never going to make a living as a writer. When you come to that realization you get a tremendous amount of freedom because you can quit acting as if that might happen. I've had publishers come to me now that they know I'm no longer with Oberon and say, "Look, we'll give you this impressive advance and we'll publish your next book." I say, "What's your print run?" They say, "Two thousand copies." Oh wow, that's going to change my life.

I see myself very much I guess as a minor ethnic writer though I'm in the main stream so I've broken free of the ethnic influence. The Icelandic people are wonderful people. I can always depend on them to buy my books. I sold a thousand copies of one of my books of short stories in three days in Iceland. People come and say, "I'll take six." One woman bought a dozen copies. I thought she was just nervous. She was stacking all the books in my display. I thought she had a really bad, nervous habit and a need to get things orderly. Then she said "I'll take those."

LF: You have a lot of support?

WDV: Oh yes, absolutely. Always have had. Icelanders really admire making money. But they're different than other groups because they admire much more than that in a writer. I was invited by the Icelandic government this past summer to go to Iceland for two weeks at the government's expense. And I said, "What do I have to do?", and they said, "Nothing." They said, "Just come."

WDV: They don't regard me as a foreign writer. As far as they're concerned I'm an Icelandic writer.

LF: Being Icelandic has made a difference to you?

WDV: Tremendous difference.

LF: Do you speak Icelandic?"

WDV: No. My mother's Irish. You learn language from your mother. I learned to be a story teller sitting around our kitchen table listening to my dad and other people tell me stories about the fishermen. They still do it.

LF: Were you isolated when you were a kid?

WDV: Completely. Isolated on all kinds of counts. Isolated because I was sensitive in a way that nobody could really help. There is no help. Also I was very intelligent and that's very painful because what happens is the sensitivity and intelligence cause you to feel like you were a television set in which the sound and the picture were never the same. And those don't come into sync until you learn the language when you're middle-aged if you're lucky. I felt very alienated, very separate, very lonely all the time.

LF: And writing makes a difference to that?

WDV: You bet. It brings you social approval and gives you a place to be. It also gives you a sense of accomplishment. It's left me a loner. I go hiking in the forest alone here. I go rock climbing alone which is very dangerous but I prefer to go alone. The one thing I do that is very community is dancing. I do folk dancing as opposed to rock and roll dancing. Folk dancing is a communal dance where you dance in circles and lines.

LF: Do you have a greater sense of community now than you did before?

WDV: Yes. A much greater sense of community. For one thing, I think the trip to Iceland gave me many answers. I saw the reasons for things so they no longer felt like they'd been done to me personally. They did wonderful things for me. They drove me out to my great-great-grandfather's farm. There's still a farmer there. The fellow with me from the National Library explained to the farmer what it was I wanted. I sat on a rock and the farmer started smiling and he said to the National Librarian, "Just like his great-great-grandfather, he sits on a rock and walks on the beach". I remember the sense of naturalness. You think you're just yourself, but the things that I do now are things that my ancestors obviously did that I didn't know about.

LF: It makes you think about the collective unconscious. It's not such a deep river after all, or if it is, you're tapped in.

WDV: Yes. I think it's a deep river, but I'm tapped in.

LF: What about love? Have you been loved or supported in your writing?

WDV: Oh yes. My mother and father. My grandfather and grandmother. Totally unconditional. That's one of the things that are most difficult about knowing love; learning to love. You learn things like needs-theory, and you realize that when people say they love somebody what they really mean is that they've decided that this person can fulfill their needs and now they're obliged to because of the way they feel. The other person may not even care about them. If people both think they're in love it means that they both have decided that they meet each other's needs.

LF: Did you have a protective kind of environment that's loving, but not pushy or intruding?

WDV: My parents and my mother's parents. I see other writers who have married men or women who become sort of earth mothers, who protect them, their time, and their talent.

LF: Do you have a greater freedom to push the limits if you grow up continually approved of?

WDV: Yes. That has to come from childhood relationships with adults. I don't think that comes later. It might come later if you are lucky enough to find someone who believes in your talent and who is sensitive to your needs, and understands the incredible selfishness of one's anima and one's art. If they understand and enjoy it, revel in it and accept it, that would be wonderful because then you have such an incredible security within which to operate.

LF: You think that's a bit fantastic?

WDV: It's just not my experience. My experience is that the kind of people that are attracted to me are often attracted because I am a writer and that means that they often have hidden agendas. They have their own ambitions. The Yoko Onos of the world. You see the trouble with a relationship with women is, that no matter what they say, they always want that relationship to lead to intimacy; they want it to lead to sex, love, holding hands.

LF: Emotionally?

WDV: Yes. Well, physically.

LF: Why? Because the physical manifestation is proof?

WDV: I don't know. I don't understand it. I've dodged that. You can see it develop. Then you begin to feel trapped and you feel, "No, this isn't what I want. I don't want something like this. I want an intellectual relationship".

LF: Don't muddy it up?

WDV Don't muddy it up.

LF: Beyond that sort of physical relationship?

WDV: Would that ever be nice. As a matter of fact, there is somebody I have a relationship with like that and I've had that relationship with her since she was fifteen, but she lives so far away that we only get to see each other about once a year. If we lived closer, we'd have a relationship like that. She's happily married with a family.

LF: Someone who doesn't want any of those kinds of demands so you're freed up then to explore and push and invite a dialogue.

WDV: Yes, invite a dialogue, that's a good way to put it.

LF: Could that really push creativity?

WDV: Very much. You can't do it with other writers because there's too much jealousy.

LF: Would it be too incestuous?

WDV: Yes. Hidden agendas all over the place. Dreadful. No, that's why I get my packsack, my ounce of brandy, my thermos of coffee, and I go climb a mountain. I sit up in my cave or on a cliff.

LF: What sort of autobiography do you borrow from your life?

WDV: I didn't write my climbing stories until I went and took two full semesters of rock climbing with my kids. So you've got to know your subject matter. I agree with Hemingway, "Don't go out and say I'm going to do this because I'm going to write about it." You can enhance your writing by research and study and all those things, but go out and live, and then write. Be sensitive. That's why you're a writer. But what I write is fiction.

LF: When people ask you, "Is that true or did that really happen?" what do you think they're asking?

WDV: Even people who should know better find it virtually impossible to separate the author, the implied author, the narrator, and characters. They don't understand about "true." They're confusing poetic truth, factual truth, and a lot of young writers get hung up on that. They'll say to you, if anything's criticized, "But that's what happened." It doesn't matter. It's totally irrelevant whether it "happened" or not.

LF: Are they asking about the human truthfulness?

WDV: No. They're asking if the incident actually happened. You're expecting too much of them to ask the other. But they want to believe it. Most people live an incredible fantasy. You have to understand that. We did a survey at a football game and found that 75 percent of the potbellied, out-of-shape men who could hardly walk up the stairs, believed they actually could have done the play better than the quarterback. And people make things up. For example, I knew a woman working in a credit union. After the story "Hunting" came out, and she read it, she said, "Bill, I didn't know that you knew that my uncle was a ..." I didn't even know her uncle. But I had apparently described their kitchen and him. That's because you tell the truth, the TRUTH. The psychological truth is what's important.

LF: Is that where the authenticity of the story exists?

WDV: Yes.

LF: When you're writing, do you have a writing voice?

WDV: I have an endless number of ego states. I'm aware that when I'm writing intensely, that without any effort, I drop into a hypnotic state, a very light hypnotic state.

LF: Through willing?

WDV: No. I just do. That's just part of writing for me. That's why I'm able to do things, like write on a ferry or write in a laundromat. I didn't realize that's what it was until I did so much reading of books on hypnotism. I thought, "I do that." I just thought everybody did that. I can dissociate pain. The mind can do amazing things. There are people who can do them naturally and I guess I'm one of those people. I just always have done them and never thought anything about it. It never occurred to me that I was different than anybody else.

LF: Can you slip in and write in any of those voices?

WDV: I don't know. It's awfully complex. When I write I think it's always the ego state. There's only one voice. That's why there's a consistent voice because it's always that ego state.

LF: If you're midway in a story in a particular ego state and you go away from it and come back, can you read it and slip in?

WDV: Yes, and that's why I only go absolutely berserk whenever I would be working on a story and somebody would come to the cottage and walk in the room and say "Hey, Bill?" Whenever I'm doing my wild and crazy dancing it's a different ego state. It's me, but I'm very aware that I'm being energetic. Whereas when I'm doing writing, I'm very quiet, very lost in thought. Some people would say I'm being uncommunicative.

LF: There's a level of awareness there that's quite different?

WDV: Yes, I've spent a decade studying it.

LF: Is there an element of seeing the world in layers and context?

WDV: Always. I see the world like a piece of filo pastry. There's no single crust.

LF: Do you use metaphor to reframe when you see things happening? Do the metaphors change the way things are for you?

WDV: Yes.

LF: Do you use your metaphors to see the world or do you see the world and then invent the metaphors?

WDV: There's a term with computers: it's an "interactive" process, not a one way street. It's always moving in both directions, flow, constant flow. What I find is that I often need time to stop the input. That's why I need to get away, I literally need to lower the level of input. I can become overwhelmed. Then I take time out, like going hiking by myself. I don't take anybody with me because they talk. The thing that I want is the silence on the mountain; a feast for eyes and ears with the sound of the wind.

They're intense, but they're intense right out of your heart. When I go sketching I also don't take anybody with me. I don't want in some sense to have the social obligation to talk to them. It disrupts that ego state. I want to go and spend eight hours sketching and take my food and coffee. I don't want interruptions. It's not social.

LF: I don't climb, but I mountain walk and also sketch.

WDV: You understand.

LF: I do. Some people have said that writing is a way of externalizing or making sense of things, solving problems. Is that true for you?

WDV: Absolutely. A writer writes in order to create meaning out of chaos. I write to find answers. I think people who write not to find answers, write entertainment or propaganda.

LF: Do you think the writer has a function in society?

WDV: Absolutely. Certainly in Canadian society, the function of the writer is to create a mirror by which society sees its own reality and becomes conscious of who it is and why it is. The writer is a central figure in the self-actualizing process of the society.

LF: When you say mirror, do you think of a mirror ten minutes into the future or ten minutes into the past?

WDV: Both. Canada desperately needs writers who will popularize and make understandable our history and our past. We need writers who will tell us about the present and about the future.

LF: Do you want to say anything else about writing.

WDV: No.

W. D. Valgardson Teaching Interview, April 23, 1987

LF: Have you taught in the school system?

WDV: I taught six years. That was more than enough.

LF: Six years, was that all high school?

WDV: I taught in various northern Manitoba high schools. Then I got my Masters degree, came back to Winnipeg, and taught. So that was six years. Then I went off to Missouri and taught in a private women's college.

LF: A private women's college? Was that an interesting experience?

WDV: Wonderful. Absolutely fabulous.

LF: Were you teaching writing or English?

WDV: Both. I became chairman of the English Department. It was a small college, but very good. At one time it was a very classy finishing school, but also had high academic standards. It was grand. I learned. They knocked a bunch of rough edges off me.

LF: Rounded out your being?

WDV: Yes.

LF: You've been at University of Victoria since 1974?

WDV: Yes.

LF: What kind of classes do you teach?

WDV: Writing Workshops and Structure of Fiction.

LF: And how much teaching do you have to do?

WDV: Nine hours a week. It's too much. Two classes, six hours a week would be reasonable.

LF: That would give you time to read, study, and make reasonable comments?

WDV: Yes.

LF: Do you have any sense of optimum number of people when you're teaching a class?

WDV: Less than ten in a workshop is difficult to teach because there's not enough productivity. Over 15 is too many because you don't have enough interaction.

LF: With individual students?

WDV: Yes.

LF: Are any of your students in compulsory courses? Do they have to take your courses?

WDV: No, except that we also have a co-operative education program and that brings a lot of students to us who don't want to be there to learn to write, but are there because they want to be a journalist and they want a job.

LF: When you were teaching creative writing alongside literature, was there a big difference in the way you taught?

WDV: I didn't teach literature. I taught composition along with creative writing. I taught the expository and argumentative essay. And, yes, astounding differences. The students said it was like Jekkyl and Hyde. They'd say, "You wouldn't believe how nice he is when he ceaches creative writing."

LF: Why is that?

WDV: First of all, because you have big classes in composition and it's compulsory and a lot of the students are resentful. They don't want to be there. You have the whole discipline thing, an attitude thing that you've got to deal with. In creative writing, you don't. People are there, and they're joyful. They're doing their own work. There's a lot of element of failure in a composition classes.

LF: You think probably you can't teach like that?

WDV: No, I can't. Well, I could, if somebody said to me, "Look, you teach essay writing, and I'll give you ten or fifteen students." Yes, I could probably make it very interesting.

LF: What about the atmosphere that you try to create in your creative writing class?

WDV: The big thing there is to create, ideally, a group of people that work together instead of compete against each other, and that don't trust each other. The major problem you have in teaching writing is to change people's attitudes. If you teach them craft, the major problem the students have when they come is they've bad attitudes. You teach them to be good readers, to accept criticism, and teach them to understand it's a real psychological thing. There's a lot of need to change the way they see things if they're going to be successful.

LF: You work hard to get a kind of full psychological safety, but also freedom that comes after.

WDV: Yes, I set up a very strong structure. For example, I tell them I don't want to hear whether they like or dislike a story. It's of no relevance. I want to hear how it works. I want to hear it talked about in terms of its working and its craft. How they learn vocabulary in the discussion of craft. I'm really not that interested in the negative part of it. I want to hear what works. I don't want them putting their names on their manuscripts. I want manuscripts coming anonymously because I think it makes for much better discussion.

LF: To what extent do you use students as peer editors?

WDV: Everybody has read the story supposedly, and they come in, sit down, and we have a discussion. I try to lead the discussion. I do more "teaching" than most people. I use all the stories as a basis for teaching. The first story that comes in using the first person I give my lecture on the advantages of stories written in the first person.

LF: Do you talk about creativity and inspiration?

WDV: Yes. And dreams. And using the things like writing, drawing, painting, for stimulating creativity. I think Alex Colville's absolutely right, if you work at being creative, you produce a lot more than if you sit and wait.

LF: Just get down and do it. Never mind whether you feel like it.

WDV: Yes.

LF: Do you share your own ideas on methods?

WDV: Oh, do I ever.

LF: There's a great deal of exchange?

WDV: It's mostly from me to them. I'm teaching at undergraduate level, so in most cases there isn't a lot of talk. I do a lot of teaching.

LF: Sometimes teachers spend a lot of time talking about writing, talking about brainstorming or spider-webbing for instance.

WDV: I think they're good exercises. I don't do them. But I tell people about things, like getting an old pair of shoes. If you can't write, just go get an old pair of shoes and put them on the table, and then start to write a story about the personality of the shoes.

LF: A kind of language sketching?

WDV: Yes. And clustering, and journal work.

LF: What sort of thing do you do for a typical writing assignment?

WDV: I don't give assignments. They have to write three short stories each term. They have to be thirty-five hundred words or longer, or two stories, one a thousand words and one fifteen hundred words. In order to learn to write they've got to write. It's no good writing one precious little piece of five hundred words.

LF: Do you have any other requirements other than length?

WDV: It has to be a story. It mustn't be an anecdote, mustn't be an essay, and it mustn't be a personality profile. It's got to be a short story. It's got to have a plot; it's got to have characters to develop.

LF: Always prose?

WDV: Yes. It's a short story course. If they want to take poetry, there are poetry courses. If they want to take drama, there are drama courses.

LF: Do you have things like deadlines?

WDV: You bet. You've got to have deadlines. I didn't used to have deadlines, but that was when the classes were smaller and we were newer. But now I have deadlines because I find that one of the things they have to learn is to meet deadlines. If you're going to be a writer, you've got to meet deadlines. A story the day after the magazine goes to press is no good.

LF: Do you have students do any writing in the class at all?

WDV: No.

LF: Can I ask why?

WDV: It's a waste of time. I think writing in class in high school is a good thing.

LF: Because it exerts the discipline right there?

WDV: Yes.

LF: It's a very different setting, of course.

WDV: Very different.

LF: So you think it's quite legitimate within a class?

WDV: In classrooms in high school, you need to do a lot of group things. I think it's good to do group writing. I think it's good to do it right there. And then those who are really keen can do writing on their own. But you've got to give them structure in order to be able to do that sort of thing. You've got to encourage it. You really need exercises. It's good to give them things like scenes to write. "Write a scene of different people meeting who haven't seen each other for five years." They need a lot of guidance.

LF: How about guidance here? How much help or personal connection do you give? Do you talk to students?

WDV: I keep office hours. When students come to see me, it's usually because they're troubled. When they come to see me it's because they can't write. The reason I find most people can't write is because their writing is becoming threatening, so they come to talk about a sentence, but what we end up talking about is something in their personal life.

LF: So you end up counselling? Does that bug you?

WDV: No. That's perfectly legitimate. I can't solve their problems for them, but if someone hasn't been able to write for six weeks and we find out--I ask them always what was the last thing they wrote. And it turns out they were working on something and they start to tell me about it and then they burst into tears. We'll use up half a box of Kleenex over the next hour. Then they go away and they start writing again. It solved the problem, didn't it.

LF: There's the whole writer.

WDV: I've trained myself. I mean I've spent a decade on it.

LF: So the help very often is psychological help. Do they submit a portfolio to get in?

WDV: Not in the first year. They used to do it, but it's too much work. It was a good way to do it, but the university can't, or won't give us the resources to do that. I put that whole structure into place. But the university says it can't afford to have that system even though it works. So, students come sliding into first year without anything. It's a terrible waste of taxpayers' money.

LF: And a waste of time--theirs, yours.

WDV: Yes. For advanced standing they have to send us a portfolio.

LF: I have a question about allowing space and silence for students to struggle with their writing. That doesn't go on in the classroom, but it must go on somewhere, don't you think?

WDV: Yes, because they're doing three stories over a term and there are no textbooks, their struggle is really with themselves.

LF: You nurture them along each week.

WDV: Yes.

LF: So when students bring their draft in, they just bring it in--

WDV: They duplicate it. If there's fifteen students, I always have them make seventeen copies. I always have to have two copies because I mark one up intensely and put a grade on it. Then I put a grade on the other one which I don't mark up. I put it in a file with their name on it. I keep a file for each of the students in the class. I give them back the marked- up copy after we've discussed their story. That way I always have a record of everything they've written for the term.

LF: So you can see what progress is made?

WDV: Yes. Then I can see some progress. At the end of the term I go back over them in the file.

LF: You mark each piece?

WDV: Yes. I mark each piece, put grades on it. Some of the instructors disagree with it, but it's my system.

LF: Does it give you heartburn to mark?

WDV: No. I'm paid one hundred per cent of my salary to do a whole job.

LF: What sorts of things do you use for marking criteria? Do you have a holistic sense?

WDV: Yes. I don't have it broken down. I guess I could, but I don't bother. I'm looking at things like: Is there a plot? Should there be a plot? Does the plot work? Are the characters fully enough developed? Should they be fully developed? Is there a theme? Is it a worthwhile theme? Is it just a cliche? Is the theme fully developed? Is the point of view consistent? Should it be consistent?

LF: There's almost no way of having that all separated out. It's such a complex, but it's a unit.

WDV: Yes. But I can spot all the places where things are going wrong. What's more important, I can spot the places that are going right even though the student doesn't know they're going right. They can't tell when they've written something that's good or bad. They might have two pages of really good writing and two pages of really bad writing and don't know the difference.

LF: Do you ever read anything aloud?

WDV: No. Well, yes, I do. Sometimes I will take a story that is very close--it's in the final stages--and it's reached the place where everything's working, but, it needs real editing. It needs certain kinds of development. Then I read it and edit it word by word, line by line, the whole story. I use the whole three hours for the story.

LF: They can really see what's going on?

WDV: Yes. I will actually edit it, rewrite, everything, right in front of them. I show them. I actually do it for them.

LF: Yes. The whole process there is not well taught at the high schools. It's often after the fact. "Here's a spelling error. You had a spelling error. You had a grammar error."

WDV: The fact is most people can't do it.

LF: Yes. That's why I wonder about the business of being a writer? How much does that help?

WDV: Somebody who wasn't a writer couldn't do that. Even a good critic can't do that. A good critic can only make generalizations, maybe pick up all sorts of sentence flaws, but I don't do that. I stand up--

LF: You teach from the inside of the process?

WDV: Yes. I rewrite. I say, "Now here, this has moved from being here to here," and I say that in class as I'm doing it.

LF: Do you talk about audience with your students?

WDV: You bet. All the time. To control language as I mentioned earlier. The fact is that often the language in their stories and the dialogues are wrong. For example, often with first person. "I don't want to write first person," they'll say, "it just doesn't work." "The reason it doesn't work is because you don't know who this person's telling. It's a first-person story. It's a person speaking. Who are they speaking to? Are they crazy? Are they talking to nobody? They're not crazy. So who are they talking to?"

LF: Which is an essential problem with first person.

WDV: Yes. They answer, "Well, I don't know."

LF: Do you yourself ever write in the classroom?

WDV: I never discuss my writing.

LF: Two things: either they'll think it's terrible, so "Why are we learning from him" or it's really good and they're intimidated?

WDV: No. Well, yes, there's those. There are some students who would really dearly like me to talk about my writing because they've read it, they've enjoyed it, and they'd like to hear what I'd say about it. They feel they could learn from it. There are also other students who--always at least one or two--who feel like they're a captive audience. You're so incompetent that nobody would read anything you've written. You're just a professor and you're forcing this material on them and they go to the Ombudsperson and complain about it.

LF: Revision: do you spend a lot of time on it?

WDV: A lot of time on revision. What impressed me about W.P. Kinsella when he was a student of mine was the fact that he was willing to revise as often as I told him to. He just kept right on going. I knew he was going to become a writer. He had ability, talent, and the rewriting. He's willing to rewrite. No time for primadonnas.

LF: It's the work habit being established?

WDV: Yes. They say to me, "But I'm a genius." And I say to them, "Yeah, but I'm a genius too, so what?"

LF: I asked you about your marking system. Do you have any suggestions for school teachers about "correcting"? I'm sure you know the kinds of things that people will write on papers in high school.

WDV: Try not to let your psychoses and neuroses be the reason for the comments. Do the job you're paid to do. You're not being paid to dump your own personal problems on the students. Save them for after school.

LF: That's vehement. Why do you say that?

WDV: Ah, I see it all the time. I often see the criticism that's more than due, and the person doing the criticizing has no real--

LF: They take offence at something?

WDV: Yes. Or they've got some kind of hangups or problems. Look at the work. Make your comments positive. But not falsely. Don't go around praising stuff that isn't worth the praise. I hate getting students who come in and they've got A's and they're illiterate. I try to point out what really does work.

Show people how to make it better. It's no good saying it doesn't work if you don't show them how to make it better. What's important is to show them. Most people want to succeed. Most people want to do better. Help them do better. Don't get in the way. Don't criticise everything.

LF: Don't always mark the "daylights" out of it?

WDV: Yes. Comment on different things. You get seven exercises in? Then maybe do one on marking everything. But the others, do particular things. You don't have to teach everything all the time. It's too discouraging. There's too much risk already.

LF: I worry about people in the school system.

WDV: Yes, but also I say this. Ten years ago when I was crossing this country and speaking at teacher's conventions, in those days, when I said, "Learning grammar and learning punctuation never hurt anybody's creativity. As a matter of fact, it freed it," half the teachers would stand up and say, "You hate students. You want to destroy creativity." Now I only get a few people saying it. I mean there's nothing wrong. We need to get back to teaching composition in this country. Everybody wants to teach literature instead of composition because it's fun to talk about sex and death.

LF: It's easier?

WDV: It's easier. It's really tough work to teach composition because you can really evaluate whether you've succeeded or not, whether they've succeeded or not. But that's what we need to be teaching.

LF: If you can get people to care about their compositions, then maybe they'll care more about other stuff?

WDV: That's right. It's a disgrace that we don't teach composition. I was in the school system when they changed that. Everyone was just going to teach literature and enjoy it.

LF: It shows.

WDV: Of course.

LF: Do you talk about publishing in your classes?

WDV: You bet. I talk about money, lots. I offend all kinds of people. A young lady came in and said "I want to be just in poetry." I said, "Yes, but what do you want in terms of living? I understand that you want to be published." And she said, "As a poet." I said, "This country is full of extremely talented, productive people, and not one of them makes a living in poetry. Why do you think you're going to? Who are you planning on emulating?" No, I talk about it. I show them exactly what I earn. I talk about the fact that during the depression you got $1500 for a short story from the Saturday Evening Post and a family of four could live on a hundred dollars a month very well. I sold a story to the Post a few years ago and I got 350 bucks for it.

LF: So that gets rid of some of the illusions?

WDV: Yes. That's what I mean about changing their attitudes. They've got to know reality. Not to discourage them. Some of them say, "You're so pessimistic." I'm not pessimistic at all.

LF This is how it is.

WDV: This is just how it is. Make your decisions on the basis of reality.

LF: Do you have people drop out?

WDV: Yes. The drop-out rate is huge.

LF: That's good?

WDV: It's very good. Sometimes they leave part way through the term. I'm really helping them. The thing is that if they can't or won't deal with reality, then they need to get out. If they're going to stay in writing, they're going to be unhappy because they can't make a living at it. Especially when they knew from the very beginning they couldn't make a living.

LF: Yes. So if they want to write badly enough, they stay?

WDV: Yes.

LF: How do you deal with bad writing? Really terrible writing?

WDV: Really bad? I give it F's.

LF: That gets their attention.

WDV: First of all, they complain to the Ombudsperson.

LF: Now there's a grievance--an "F"!

WDV: Oh yeah, it goes on all the time. At one time I said to the Ombudsperson, "Why don't you just move your stuff into my office? Everybody's going to talk about us going together. We spend all our time together."

LF: I'm surprised. Delusions of grandeur or what?

WDV: Yep.

LF: If somebody writes a piece badly, although the idea and so on is good, do you just keep on with the rewrites?

WDV: Yes.

LF: Do you ever have problems with plagiarism?

WDV: Yes.

LF: What do you do about that?

WDV: It's virtually impossible to prove plagiarism in creative writing. You know there's plagiarism, but you can't prove it. There are ten thousand literary magazines out there that they can steal stuff from. So you know it, but you can't do anything. You just know it's there.

LF: Do you confront students?

WDV: No. It's not worth it.

LF: So you ignore it?

WDV: Yes. There's enough flexibility in the system to make sure.

LF: What about deadlines?

WDV: I'm a real softy. I'm terrible. I'm always left accepting things late.

LF: Do you negotiate or collaborate with the students about what happens in the class?

WDV: No. Very little.

LF: You say, "Here's how I run my class."

WDV: Yes. I tell them that I overheard students one day in the hallway saying I was a mean son-of-a-bitch, and I thought that was fair.

LF: That's high praise?

WDV: I took it that way.

LF: Do you have frustrations in teaching?

WDV: Endless. The universities nowadays in my opinion don't have any academic standards. "Take this placement test and get out of the way." In order to get enough students to keep the universities going they take the walking dead. Students come to university with no discipline, no study skills, no skills much at anything. But with a lot of high grades so their expectations are very unrealistic. I've seen something in the last few years that I've never seen before in my life, and that is moms and dads turning up with twenty-one-year-old students. The student sits there while mom and dad want to talk about what courses he's taking. I've never seen that before. It's like they want to extend high school all the way through university.

LF: You have a kind of parent-teacher interview?

WDV: Yes. It's shocking. A lot of time is wasted at university in all the administrative things. It's not as bad as high school where you spend your time collecting milk money, but there are similar things. There's a lot of time wasted by the thoughtlessness.

LF: Are the sources of your frustration things you don't have control over?

WDV: Yes. Things I do have control over are great. I just fix them immediately.

LF: How do you think writing can be taught? In what ways can it be taught if it can?

WDV: Sure it can. People always say to me--it's really interesting--somebody's just spent fifteen-thousand, twenty- thousand dollars on music lessons for their kids, music lessons at the conservatory, and then they start saying to me, "You can't teach writing."

And they say, "After all, nobody can give somebody talent they don't have." I say "Well, why did you get music lessons for your kids? Nobody can make them into grand concert pianists. Did they promise you that when they gave the lessons?"

LF: So you have a sense of the old-fashioned notion of "practice" when it comes to writing?

WDV: Yes, and the fact is that people come and you teach them to write. They can write better and they can read better than when they came in. If they've got a lot of talent and a lot of self-discipline, they might do something with it. If not, I don't know.

LF: Do you spend a considerable amount of time doing "composition" work in creative writing?

WDV: I talk to them about things like syntax. They get that sort of befuddled look when I talk about complex sentences. They don't like complex sentences. I talk a lot about the emotional content of syntax, the fact that two simple sentences and a sentence fragment do not create the same emotional impact as a complex sentence. It has nothing to do with grammar; it's just the effect. A Hemingway short story written in sentence fragments or simple sentences and the same story written by Updike in his highly complex syntax create a different emotional effect.

LF: Are you teaching them a combination of craft as well as ways of seeing and reading for themselves?

WDV: Yes. If I really want to terrify them I talk about the difference between Latinate and Anglo-Saxon--that gets their attention.

LF: Have any of them taken Latin?

WDV: No. Some of them have taken French. Some of them might have taken Spanish.

LF: Learning another language really does reframe the way somebody sees language.

WDV: Oh yes. People who have learned another language are always better at the language than those that haven't. It shakes the hell out of people to say, "Hey, they should be teaching kids two languages." Read the Letters to the Editor about French Immersion. It's just silly. No pedagogy at all.

LF: It's like seven metaphors may be closer than one, and if you have seven languages rather than one--

WDV: Yes, you get to know English better. Students who have learned their French really know their English. They can talk about past participles and gerunds.

LF: Structure, yes. Are there differences in the way you teach writing and the way you were taught writing?

WDV: Sure. The only thing I remember about the way we were taught writing is that we were taught to parse sentences. Things that I wish people were still taught. That kind of structural approach has been abandoned in favour of the linguistic approaches which are fine if you're going to be a linguist.

LF: If they've had that early experience, at least you have a common overlapping context?

WDV: A vocabulary. You can communicate. If they haven't got it, you haven't got it.

LF: And there's no time to explain all that.

WDV: No. You haven't got time to teach it now.

LF: By virtue of the situation you have to teach differently?

WDV: Yes. It's too bad. You see we didn't take creative writing in high school. We learned to write essays. I was lucky in high school. I had one very good, superb teacher who came up, very sensitive, intelligent guy. A wonderful guy who taught literature, who made it okay for a guy to like literature.

LF: Do you think anybody can teach writing?

WDV: It's just like there are good piano teachers and bad piano teachers.

LF: Anybody can go through the motions?

WDV: After all, you can tell if you look at music students because you can see them perform. You can tell the people who come through with good music teachers. They love their subject. They can play an instrument. Whatever talent they've got has been developed to its fullest potential. And then you get people who've come through shitty music teachers. They hate music; they can't be bothered. They fight you the whole way. They've got bad habits even if they play an instrument.

LF: Do you think teachers who don't write themselves have a disadvantage?

WDV: Yes. Because they lack understanding; they lack empathy and sympathy. That does not mean the opposite. It does not mean if someone is a writer, they can teach. The majority of writers are hopeless teachers. They're too self-centred. They're too egocentric. They're too involved with their art. They're often too involved with their personal hangups. Writers are dreadful in terms of neuroses. You want neuroses and psychoses? Get six writers in the room? We're very lucky in our department because we've got a group of writers who can teach. Someone like Fred Wah. He's a good person, taught all these years at Selkirk College, done a lot for the students.

LF: Do you think maybe there's a confidence that writers have about their own writing before they're able to teach or do you think it's personality?

WDV: I think it's personality. I think if you're successful at writing it helps to give you confidence. All of it can destroy you. Look at the guy who wrote Love Story, Erich Segal. He was a brilliant lecturer at Harvard and he ended up not getting tenure. His whole teaching career got into a "schmozzle." He started comparing himself to Shakespeare. Success is hard to deal with. Failure is hard to deal with. Success is much harder.

LF: For teachers then, who aren't professional writers, would you recommend that they write themselves?

WDV: You bet. They should go and take some writing workshops. If nothing else, they'll learn humility and be more sympathetic to their students who are struggling. You asked me earlier about what I'd done to teach myself. One of the things I did was take correspondence courses in composition and creative writing from the University of North Dakota. Wonderful courses.

LF: Also the notion of discipline comes up when you're doing these kinds of things for yourself.

WDV: Yes. A lot of teachers if they're really not sure of how to teach writing, spend some money and look around in the catalogues. Write away and pay for a course in the kind of writing you would like to teach. Do the course, then use the notes to teach your classes from. Those courses are often very good.

LF: How do you think your being a publishing writer makes a difference in your own teaching?

WDV: It gives me confidence. It also gives me authority. I've earned the authority. I've earned the right to make statements. Whereas if I haven't published, the students can say, "The hell with you. I know as much as you." You have to understand, our second-year students are publishing. Under my table in the office I've got two large boxes full of books that were published by our students. Not self-published, commercially published.

LF: Since you're connected with the business of publishing, a work really isn't dead after a student has a grade.

WDV: Yes. After all, if a student comes in and is a second or third year or fourth year and has just published, and you've never published anything, who's got the credibility?

LF: That really puts holes in the hiring practice, doesn't it? Perhaps not in creative writing, but in other writing courses there are a lot taught by people who haven't published.

WDV: There are a lot of writing courses that shouldn't be being taught. I think there are a lot of courses that are offered that are supposed to be writing courses, that are really nothing but entertainment.

LF: Can you be specific? Are there things you think shouldn't be going on in classrooms?

WDV: I'm thinking here of outside the school system. I'm not thinking here of the public schools. I'm probably exaggerating. Let's be serious. Courses are taught that are called creative writing that are taught by people who are unqualified. There's a lot of unqualified people teaching non-credit courses who I don't think have any business teaching courses. The trouble with writing is--well, in chemistry they'd never get a chance to do it--but the trouble with writing is that because everybody can do it, everybody thinks they're qualified. Unfortunately, in some cases they aren't.

LF: What are the qualities of teacher and writer that overlap or do they?

WDV: Sure. Sensitivity, intelligence, knowledge of craft, accomplishment, organization--being well organized--the ability to understand people's motivations. There are people who teach creative writing who really don't want to teach creative writing; they really want to be an analyst, but they're not qualified. What they really want to do is run a therapy session on the cheap.

LF: You have a group session going on using people's writing as the material?

WDV: There's nothing wrong with therapy through writing if you've got qualified people, but I'm not aware of anybody who does it. That's really dangerous stuff. It's all ego. It's all "Look at me, the guru. I'm so important." People get hurt and it's all there because you've got somebody with a neurotic need to be important. We get a lot of people who come to creative writing classes who want that as students. And my instructions as Chairman of the department are always, "People, don't get your ego involved. People do not come here for therapy. People come here to avoid therapy."

LF: Do you write a journal other than your dream journal?

WDV: No.

LF: Why do you teach?

WDV: Money.

LF: That's all?

WDV: I get satisfaction out of teaching very talented students. There aren't very many. If I won 649, I'd go, "Phew."

LF: And also there's a sense of having done it for several years?

WDV: Yes, and time is becoming more precious.

LF: Has your teaching changed?

WDV: Yeah, kind of. I'm more forgiving.

LF: Partly from your own experience or is it just a question of aging?

WDV: I think it's a question of aging. I think that's always true. People just out of graduate school are hell on students. As they get older, they get more human.

LF: Do you have a metaphor of yourself as teacher?

WDV: The same one as I had in high school. At the beginning of every class I said, "My job is to teach you to be independent. My job is to make you not need me. How much you move from needing me is how much a success I've made."

LF: Do you think you can teach teachers that kind of attitude?

WDV: You aren't going to do that in one-hour sessions.

LF: What about the function of a teacher?

WDV: To create structure; to give people the skills.

LF: And to have the language to use?

WDV: Yes. You've got to have the language.

LF: So let the students use themselves as material?

WDV: Yes. My experience is that people who write their own fiction, poetry, and drama learn English faster and better than they do writing formal essays. But they still should do both. Always both. There's lots of time. For different purposes. My son is twenty-two years old and becoming a visual artist. He's not at all print-oriented, but I've been after him about learning it, using computers to learn it, because I said, "Man, as an artist you're going to have to learn to do grant applications."

LF: Again you're talking about empowerment.

WDV: Of course, independence. And, as fast as possible get students to do things that are real with language. I say to them, "Publish. Start putting stuff in the mail. You got a B? You disagree with me? Get it published, you get an A." And they do. They come back.

LF: And so that's a measure for you?

WDV: Yes. Of course in high school that's harder.

LF: But there are newspapers?

WDV: Sure. But make it as real as possible.

LF: You were talking about having a pedagogy of teaching writing. How do you think that universities can train baby teachers? What would you say to an education department?

WDV: First of all, I would simply eliminate education departments altogether. They're a waste of money. They are a complete and utter failure. There's no justification. Education faculties that offer English courses for teachers because their students aren't good enough to pass English courses should be bulldozed. Those people have no business becoming teachers. The former system is far superior: go and study a discipline. Take a major; take a minor. Then, when you've done that, then get your certificate.

LF: So learn the trade first?

WDV: Yes, and then I'd do it differently. When people get a B.A., I'd give them a one year term to teach in high school with no teacher training. They'd do it for a year. Then they would take their training, when they knew something. I would probably set it up so that you'd pick a teacher at a school and pay that teacher an extra amount of salary to have this person as a student.

LF: What sort of advice could you give to teachers of writing?

WDV: Boy, that would take me days and months. I believe that the teaching of writing is sequential; it's not discrete. Therefore, it's very important to set up a system in such a way that it's as sequential as possible. That means there has got to be acceptance that when students cannot do the work, they have got to remain in that spot until the work is done, until they've mastered the skills. Because there is great damage done by the whole idea of failing and passing and such, you've got to find ways of overcoming that, so that those people who need more teaching get it. Also, there's got to be understanding that all learning is active, not passive. Often the teacher has to work at motivation which is one of the most difficult of circumstances. There's got to quit being all this stuff about "social passes" which push people ahead and never solve their problems. You cheat them of their lives just because it's easier as a political reality to have people pass. You don't need a particular system. You need good teachers who will take whatever system and make it work. You need to teach basic skills and quit worrying about teaching creativity. You don't teach creativity. People are born creative. Really creative people will be creative in spite of you. Nobody ever had their creativity destroyed by learning grammar. Teach people to read. Nobody can write better than they can read. If I want to increase students' ability to write I always try to increase their ability to read. But when I say this, I know that out there are writing teachers who want to play Hitler who will use what I say in order to try to impose some type of military solution. That isn't the solution, though there's got to be discipline. There's got to be order. But that has to be put in the right place, not worrying how often there are errors, but on the learning and rewarding. By the time you get to high school it's probably a big job. You should be teaching good essay writing. The big thing is that students write about things they care about. Quit asking them to write about "What I did in my summer vacation". My experience teaching in the United States was that students did disasterously until I said to them, "I want you to pick something that you really know about." All of a sudden one guy got up and gave a wonderful speech about digging graves because that was how he was earning his money at university. Another guy got up and gave a speech about being in the navy because he'd just got out of the navy. All of a sudden there wasn't any problem, and I was able to teach them the structures because the content was there.

The teacher who is teaching writing should do a lot of reading. Read what's being written now. Remember that a lot of people that we consider radical wrote their stories twenty years ago. Read current fiction. Know what's going on. Read some of the magazines. Read the New York Review of Books. Read magazines that talk about writing now. Know your work. Know it so that you really are an authority. Go to Banff. Go take a summer workshop. Nobody says you have to become a writer, but at least do it enough to learn humility, to know the process, to know writers, to know what people go through when they try to create. Provide stimulation, provide opportunities for students in their writing, so that when they come away, they are enthusiastic, and they know something, and they know who Margaret Atwood is, but also know who John Barryman is. Do things like get them introduced, not just to finished work, but to how the books got written. People love to know how movies get made. They make a movie, and then make a movie about making the movie. We're all fascinated by how things work. The same things with writing books. There's lots of writers' diaries for the reading. Read and write.

Chapter Five - Aritha van Herk

Aritha van Herk began her life in 1954 near Edberg, Alberta, daughter of Dutch parents. She has a B.A. (first class) in English (1976) and an M.A. in English (with distinction, 1978) from the University of Alberta.

Aritha taught for two years at the University of British Columbia before returning to the University of Calgary where she is currently teaching. She also keeps an active role in many writing and community organizations.

Her first novel *Judith* (1978), which was written as her M.A. thesis, won the first Seal Book Prize and has been subsequently translated into more than seven languages throughout the world. Her second and third novels, *The Tent Peg* (1981) and *No Fixed Address*, (1986) have also been reprinted and put into translation. Numerous short stories, poems, reviews, and articles have been published in such periodicals as *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *Newest Review*, *Prairie Fire*, *Miss Chatelaine*, *Malahat Review*.

Aritha gives frequent readings and public appearances at invited conferences in North America, Europe, and the Orient. She has also been awarded such honors as Province of Alberta Achievement Award for Literature (1978), Writers' Guild of Alberta Best Novel award (1986), nomination for Governor General's Award for Fiction for *No Fixed Address* (1986), and been named one of the ten best Canadian writers under age 45 (1986, "45 Below" list).

Aritha van Herk Interview Conditions

Although Aritha is a friend (beginning from Jacobean Drama and Shakespeare classes), I wrote a formal request to her in Calgary for an interview about writing and teaching and she agreed. We arranged for a weekend together at her condominium in Calgary in the middle of February in 1987.

We did our visiting and dining on Friday (the 13th) evening, consciously avoiding the topics of writing and teaching to save that energy for the actual interviews.

Saturday morning Aritha made a breakfast of bacon, baking powder biscuits, fresh gouda cut from a large round of cheese, homemade jams, and cranberry/orange juice. We then took our tea into the spacious living room and sprawled out on the carpet, both recorders on. All the questions in the questionnaire, as well as many others that arose during conversation were fully explored.

Late Saturday afternoon after the interview which took over two-and-a-half hours, I accompanied Aritha to her office at the University of Calgary and had two occasions to watch her interact with current students, gently cajoling and encouraging them. That was a quite different persona from the one of fierce academic and fiery public reader with which Aritha is sometimes associated. We shopped and Aritha cooked me dinner before she went to a party for the evening. I spent the time in chosen solitude writing at her desk by the fireplace and making notes in preparation for the teaching interview next morning on Sunday, February 15, 1987.

Again there was a home-cooked breakfast and then serious talk about each of the questions as we sat on the floor close to the fire on a cold winter day. Aritha's answers to the teaching questions required a little more than two hours. Both of us were very tired by the afternoon, as the exchange was intense and sometimes heated, but I felt well-supported in the project and pleased with this second interview.

Aritha van Herk Writing Interview February 14, 1987

LF: How long have you been writing; when did you know that writing was more than talking or more than a hobby?

AVH: I've been writing since I could read. I've thought about this often because one of the things that writers get asked about a lot is to pin point the moment when they began. If we could pin point the exact moment, we'd maybe have a notion of our motivation for the rest of our lives. It's probably good that it remains mysterious. But I do not remember not writing. I don't remember consciously beginning; it seems I always did it, and it seems to be intricately tied to learning to read. I think the two things happened at the same time. I perceived a possibility in the world of words that was not available to me in the world around me.

LF: Did you write all during your early school years?

AVH: Oh yes, all the way through elementary and junior high school.

LF: Did you know that early in your life that you would be a "writer when you grew up"?

AVH: Once someone said to me, "Well, what are you going to do?", and I said, "I'm going to be a world famous poet." But they laughed. It was as though I was saying to them that I wanted to be a high wire artist. It never occurred to me that I would not write because it was always what I wanted to do. People have tried to deflect me from that sureness and that's where the problems entered. One way of solving it was to say to my parents, "I'm going to university" where they thought I would most certainly drift into nursing or education, but of course, all I wanted to do was take Honors English to read all the good books, because I thought if I was going to be a writer, I had to read eveything that had ever been written.

LF: Did you get encouragement to write when you were young?

AVH: I got discouragement. "You can have one piece of paper and not more." I remember getting books for my birthday, and reading the book in two hours and my mother saying, "Why don't you save it?" as though it were candy. She could not understand that I had this insatiable appetite for words. I was a word junkie then; I am a word junkie now.

LF: So the reward then and now, partly is to write so that you can read your own writing and keep it?

AVH: The two are intricately connected because once you enter the world of story, which is what happens when you read a lot as a child, it is a separate world from yours and yet you know it is a world contained within the covers of a book. That means you have a natural propensisty for becoming a story teller yourself, because the world of story does not always offer you satisfactory stories. And you begin to imagine after a while, your own stories. That follows quite naturally, but the two are intricately connected.

LF: Did you read before you went to school?

AVH: I don't remember learning to read. I remember holding books and wanting to hold them and then having them taken away from me. The assumption was that all little kids who hold books want to tear them apart.

LF: What about your formal education? Was there a place there for you in terms of stories, both reading and writing them?

AVH: Well, I am thinking about very early notions. I'm not talking about later on when you become more deliberate and where you choose what you are going to do and where you know that you are studying Dostoyevsky because he was a great writer. I'm talking about early, very elemental experiences. When I went to school, I was terribly disappointed with the stories we were given because I was already long past "See Spot run" and those kids "Dick and Jane". They were dull. But the school had a reasonably good selection of children's books. Certainly more than I could lay my hands on at home.

LF: Are you aware of things teachers did in your early formal schooling that helped with writing or reading?

AVH: There were a couple of teachers who were quite important to me. One of them was the grade 6 teacher who recognized that I was a kid who was getting "A's" who was bored out of her skull. She said, "You've got to accelerate this child because she is just kicking up her heels." That created more problems for me but also solved some. She was the teacher who read stories to us, although that was grade 6, which was fairly advanced for having a teacher read to you every afternoon. She also encouraged us to write our own stories. I remember writing very complex stories for her, that she would read aloud to the class. They were very good and I really wish I could get my hands on them now. That was the beginning. The second teacher was when I was in grade ten. By that time I was very "into" poetry. She encouraged me to write poetry and gave me a lot of Canadian poetry, so that I had a context. Those two women were encouraging.

LF: So they pushed your "edges" a bit and said, "Look at this, try this."

AVH: Yeah, they mostly gave me stuff to read and said that what I wrote was good. They weren't terribly directive and they weren't terribly critical. I mostly got encouragement.

LF: What about high school?

AVH: It was high school where I turned to the introversion of literature. It also has something to do with adolescence, to become more introverted.

The other thing that that sixth grade teacher did--I haven't thought of this for a long time--but one of her tests for us was making us read aloud. And we got marked on that. I remember there was one story in our Reader, that dramatic story about the Edmonton Grads winning the basketball championships. All of the good readers would choose this story to read. They'd choose this highly dramatic story with the intense pauses. I remember that two seconds before it was my turn I thought, "Everybody's reading this; this is a mistake." I flipped to a thoroughly innocuous story, mildly humourous. I read it aloud and that was really when I suddenly discovered that language has a performance aspect to it. The class was rolling in the aisles. All of the other serious literature students were angry because I had broken the rules. Everybody was to read the high drama. I suddenly realized that I had a great propensity for the comic as opposed to the highly dramatic. This love of the comic persisted as a minor thread through my writing. Every time I have to give a reading with all the serious heavy-weights like Wiebe and Kroetsch, there's only one thing to do: to steal the audience by reading the mundane comic stuff. I always end up being the clown even though that's not what I consider the benchmark of what I write or do.

There's a clownishness to it, that I have actually learned to love and have learned to play with.

LF: Could you carry that off in undergraduate and graduate courses?

AVH: Oh, you never did quite the same exercises in university. You never had the simplicity of reading aloud and discussing how well you understood the story. Only when I learned to play with language did I become a really good student of literature. When I first went to university I thought "this is serious stuff" so I behaved seriously. But now, what I write most are critical essays. It's comic writing, right? "Double Crossing", "Booking the Lover", "A Gentle Circumcision: Male Writers of the Prairies"--they are all stupid puns. It's a way of forcing people to laugh. I went to Singapore and when I did my opening paper I read from Roch Carrier where Joseph cuts off his own hand with an axe. They were rolling in the aisles. It's a question of how you read it. In some ways I really think this is a comment about Canadian literature. Sometimes the audience just sits there and they know by historical context that they are supposed to be stricken; they know that this is serious stuff, but there is a strange element that makes me want to mock it.

LF: Except that when you talk about that comic streak, I think of Charlie Chaplain making his comment about the fact that "All humour is born out of pain."

AVH: Very much so, it's just that people think humour is lesser writing.

LF: Did you take writing courses?

AVH: We didn't have creative writing in high school, although I kept on writing. That grade ten teacher was really, really good to me. At university, I studied with Rudy Wiebe for many years.

LF: Did you give your stuff to that grade ten teacher to read even though it wasn't something assigned?

AVH: It was private and I gave it to her to read and she responded to it. She was really a wonderful woman--just the kind of person you remember for most of your life. She did know that I had published, because she came to a reading after Judith was published. I saw her again just before she died. She was very young when she died. It was quite moving; I don't think I ever quite told her how much she had helped.

When I went to university, I thought I would get into creative writing courses to get credit for doing something that I'm doing anyway. Doug Barbour and Rudy Wiebe who taught the junior course then, the first half of the course as fiction and the second half as poetry, were both on leave when I applied. I handed in my portfolio and went in September to see Professor Wiebe, who was sitting behind his desk. I said, "Did I get in?" He said, "Yeah, I guess you're good enough to get in." "What should I do first," I asked. "Well, your portfolio is mostly poetry. Why don't you go and let Doug Barbour break you in first." Really encouraging. That was the beginning, but then I ended up taking 300, 400, and 500 with Wiebe. Years of concentrated work with a teacher who demands both concentration and improvement. It means that either you decide you're serious pretty bloody fast or you get out.

LF: You learn more discipline?

AVH: More discipline. No one can make you a writer. But the fact of the matter is that in a creative writing class you have one extremely good writer, who is also an extremely good critic, which is the ideal writing teacher. You also have 16 other captive students who presumably treat the act of writing as seriously as you do. You not only have the guidance of a very serious writer, but you have a group of people who are at the same stage as you are and who all treat your writing seriously by reading what you write and making serious comments.

You have an audience that treats you seriously and for most writers, that's the thing they lack. They are a wonderful cross-section of what you actually encounter in the real world when you publish a book. One person doesn't understand your story at all, someone else thinks the only thing wrong with it is the character; it's like the reviews you get. It's really good [in the writing class] because you get useful criticism, bad criticism, and irrelevant criticism. You learn not only what to accept and what to reject, but what is correct and is not correct. You learn what is absolutely right about the criticism, and what you can use to improve your writing and what you can just ignore. You learn about your own writing--what works and what doesn't because you have an audience. It's a wonderful microcosm of the world and a real writer discovers very quickly if she can function in that world or not. The bottom line is always what you turn in on that page.

LF: Those classes gave you a training ground then?

AVH: Experience. First of all there is an opportunity to write. Your apprenticeship proceeds so quickly because you are told what works and what doesn't. You don't have to rely on your own fallible judgement all the time. I would think that those five years of study saved me ten years of apprenticeship time. When I published *Judith* at age twenty-two I had telescoped ten years of working on my own, working in isolation, working lost, trying to figure things out, proceeding by trial and error.

LF: Did you legitimize your writing in those classes?

AVH: That's exactly the point. The wonderful thing is that it's legitimate because there is time invested. Everyone treats it seriously. You know you are not working in a child's field--very serious, very legitimate. Wiebe won the GG [Governor General's Award] just as I was entering third year to study with him. If you have to present a story to seventeen people who are going to tear it to shreds, you don't just whip off something the night before.

LF: Aside from formal training, where you really pushed yourself, were there informal places where you learned about writing?

AVH: I was studying English literature but informally I was presumably being trained to be a critic which is what the Honors English Masters and Ph.D. programs were set out for. But I was using the excuse to read. My work is my play. I mean reading Faulkner was an assignment, but it was also an enormous pleasure.

LF: Informal and formal weave together. Did you go to workshops or readings?

AVH: Yes, I participated in those because it was required, but also because it was an interesting way of discovering that world further.

LF: What caused you to move to prose, away from poetry?

AVH: My initial memories, preconscious and from early elementary school, are that I wrote stories, and I only began to write poetry as an adolescent. I think that poetry is an adolescent genre. Nothing else.

LF: Can I quote you on that?

AVH: I have to define this. Poetry is a genre that is naturally attractive to the adolescent, both in terms of reading and in terms of writing because it comes as intense emotions in a short space of words. I recognized that it was much harder to be a truly fine poet than to be a truly fine prose writer. The Baudelaires and Earle Birneys of the world are few and far between. There was much mediocre poetry; there's bad prose and there's good prose, but there's very little mediocre prose, partly because most writers who are just mediocre can't "stick out" 300 page long manuscripts. The other thing is that it was easier to conceal errors in poetry. I realized that in order to be a fine poet, I would have to commit myself in a way that would probably cost me much more, that I might never achieve. I don't think that I'm a naturally brilliant writer. I'm a learned, disciplined writer who has a perception that's useful, but I don't think I'm a gifted writer. That's a whole other question.

Now I am moving toward my notion that writing is going beyond genre. Prose, fiction, poetry. I have more images in one novel than some poets write in three years.

LF: Do you have a mentor?

AVH: A mentor? Boy, you are asking me a question. The assumption in the Canadian literary community has always been that Rudy Wiebe has always been my mentor. I confess, I've begun to be fairly sick of that designation. I did not spring fullblown from his forehead. Mentorism is a curious notion. We all like the idea that we are the one that gave birth to a particular kind of genius. I can see it in my own reaction to my students who are now getting published. I want to go around and say, "Wow, that's my student; she learned it all from me." The fact of the matter is they only learn it from you if they want to learn it for themselves. I think Rudy was my mentor when I was a student because he encouraged me to think positively about what I did. He encouraged me to continue doing what I did. To be general about it, he taught me a lot. Does that really make him my mentor?

LF: I think of mentor as a trusted advisor.

AVH: Oh, then we're entering a different realm. What makes a person a mentor? It's a question I've looked at, considered, and thought about. I'm a very independent person and there aren't many people I consult. To be honest I have sometimes consulted Rudy and then did exactly the opposite of what he told me because I knew he was dead wrong. A trusted advisor, I don't know.

LF: Do you have anybody you talk to about your work in progress?

AVH: I don't talk to anyone about what I am doing. I very seldom discuss ideas. I've never indulged in that since I left university. I'm very protective about my ideas. People often ask, "What are you writing now, Aritha?" Do they honestly expect that I will answer seriously? Do they honestly believe they have a right to ask such things? There is an incredible assumption that because literature is a public act after it's published, that it's a public act when you are doing it. I don't talk about it at all. What I do talk about is the creative process and about working and about how difficult it is, with other artists. Two friends I have--an artist and a musician--and we talk about process not content. My musician friend never says to me, " Well, I am really having trouble with B Flat." It's a private activity. Until artists completely trust what they have made, they're unwilling to pull the cloth off of the statue and show it to anyone else.

LF: What connections do you maintain with those other artists? With what organizations are you affiliated?

AVH: I'm a member of the writing community. In Alberta, I am a senior member of the writing community. In national terms, I am a well-established and respected member of the Writers Union. The national body of writers are very pragmatic. Most of those people talk about money and survival. They don't talk about ideas. I think you might have friends that you share those things with but not the larger community.

LF: And what you do together is protect your writing environment through those organizations?

AVH: They are political structures. The writing community that I enjoy--people that I see at readings--are linked by a common appreciation of good literature, and mostly of Canadian literature. When we all see each other at a Timothy Findley reading, we all go out and talk about Timothy Findley's writing. We don't say, "Well, I'm writing a story." It is the exterior that binds us, and presumably the same thing happens when I give a reading.

LF: What magazines or literary journals or reading materials do you surround yourself with?

AVH: That's absolutely essential. I make it a point to read everything that's published in terms of Canadian periodicals that I respect. I read *Descant*, *Malahat Review*, *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *Dandelion*, and the local ones especially. I edit *Dinosaur Review* with Monty Reid and Robert Kroetsch. I work on the *Western Review*. I catch up and keep up. I read more or less most of them as they cross my doorstep. For me, they are casual reading. If I have ten minutes, I'll sit down and read a story. I keep up with the new young writers that are doing very well. I also read *Women's Review*; I get them by subscription and read them all the time. I don't read the *Globe and Mail* every Saturday like most Canadians do, but I keep a close watch on literature written in English, especially here in Canada. I try to read every novel published in the English language, and I try to buy them all. It's a tough thing to keep on top of, but for me it has been extremely satisfying. It means I feel confident about my knowledge of Commonwealth literature, of British literature, of American literature. You can't be a writer if you don't read. If I don't have a book, I panic. I read about a book a day.

LF: When is your best time for reading?

AVH: At night before I go to bed or in the afternoon, although I usually have a nap in the afternoon. No question, I have to read when I'm teaching. I've just been invited to sit on the jury for a new ten thousand pound world Commonwealth literature prize. I feel very confident about it.

LF: Because you know what's been written?

AVH: Yes, and that's really essential, but besides, it's fun.

LF: The public world of the writer is quite different from the private one. Let's take a look at the private process; what leads into a project for you?

AVH: That's a really hard one to answer simply. My ideas have always come embedded within many other things and have lived in my head for a long time before they ever come out on a page. At any one given time I can be turning over and over and over six or seven ideas for novels or short stories. I can be reading material related to any one of them. I remember people saying, "Have I got an idea for you!" as though I was looking for them. It's play because I have so many ideas and I can't even hope to write all the novels that I have sitting in my head before I die. What makes me decide to work on a project is that something springs and becomes fuller. But I carry them around for a long time in my head.

LF: Does that create a quiet, intolerable pressure for you, knowing you can't write them all?

AVH: No, it doesn't. It's just nice and they're friends, friendly stories waiting and I live with them until they are large enough or old enough to be born.

LF: You've never been without a story?

AVH: No. People count sheep when they can't fall asleep; I start planning stories. I think most novels are written in the author's head before they ever actually come out. The physical act of them coming out on the page is almost a very small part of the work. They live in a writer's head. It's so much fun. I get them on the page and realize how shabby their elbows are and how thin their patches are. I think, "Oh God, now I really have to work on this." While they are in my head, they are very wonderful stories with all their plummage and possibilities.

LF: How do you transfer those stories onto the page?

AVH: I make lots of notes for everything.

LF: Does the genre make a difference?

AVH: No, nothing I write is dictated by genre.

LF: What do you need to write, what tools?

AVH: A typewriter. I can type 84 w.p.m. I made my living once as a secretary. I can pretty much keep up with how quickly I think. I do not write on a computer because I do not want to see my words on a screen; I do not want to wait to punch the print-out page. I want to feel the texture of the page I have composed immediately. I want to be able to pull that page out of the typewriter and have it in my hands. This may be a fetish on my part, but I just have to have that immmediacy between the contact of my mind and the page. The computer removes that. On the other hand, it's very good to edit on the computer. After the first draft I punch it all into the computer and I do a lot of editing. I must work on paper, hard copy, which defeats the purpose of the computer. It makes it easy to edit because I can change quickly and I don't have to retype the whole novel. It is the notion of the writer's intimacy with the page. I think the computer is making bad writers, because they no longer connect with the page. They punch it out, they edit on the screen, and then the words themselves become two dimensional instead of three dimensional. I want a three dimensional novel. I want to see my pencilled-in revisions. If you do that on the computer, you don't see it. It's lost. Sometimes the perfect word is one I wrote down before, and crossed out, but it's still there when I go back and look. If you do it on the computer, ft's gone. It's happened. I've experimented with this quite a lot so I'm comfortable with it and what I have worked out is best for me.

LF: What physical environment do you create for yourself when you write?

AVH: Silence. Nothing, just leave me alone. I have written in my university office but that's extremely difficult because someone can come to the door at any time. I dress comfortably, and try to be warm. I don't have a writing hat or lucky charm.

LF: Do you have a particular pattern to prepare yourself for writing?

AVH: I sit down and read what I wrote the day before as a way of re-entering the story. If I can't do that then I read Virginia Woolf. I must be in a room with books. I mean I surround myself with books.

LF: You clearly require privacy for your writing. Is that ever a problem for you?

AVH: That's where the public persona interferes with the private. There is a public demand for an articulate, interesting, reasonably pleasant-to-look-at artist. I could make my living giving lectures and readings and travelling around. I sometimes get four or five invitations a day. One has to develop a system to protect privacy because that is extremely intrusive. Partly it's a well developed sense of duty. I feel I have been very well rewarded by the system and I ought to be generous to other people.

LF: Do the people close to you, in your personal life, understand about the writing?

AVH: People in my personal life do not interfere with my writing or they are out of my personal life. It's very simple. I would never interfere with Bob's [husband] geology and he would never interfere with my writing. We support each other. If he has to go away to the Arctic for six months I don't whine, and if I have to bury myself in a book for four hours a day, he doesn't whine.

LF: How often do you write?

AVH: I usually start in the morning and sit down and just work most of the morning. The university and I have made an arangement that my classes will be conducted in the afternoon or evening. The mornings belong to me. I have lots of energy as you saw this morning. I like the mornings very, very, much. It's also quiet. Nobody really comes or starts their searching around the countryside before ten or eleven. I get up at six and work until eleven and then go to the university. The mornings always have, and continue to be, my best time. When I am trying to finish something, I don't stay up late. I go to bed at nine and get up at four a.m.. I like it.

LF: Do you feel like you have control over those things that compete for your time?

AVH: I usually do. I am the author of most of my discontent. If I agree to something, I do it.

Somehow I managed to get other things done anyway. In nine years I've published three novels, helped to edit two anthologies, published innumerable stories and about twenty-four essays of what I would call ficto-criticism. [van Herk also teaches full-time.]

LF: Are you getting better at saying no to things you do not really want to do?

AVH: I'm getting terrific at saying, "NO." In the last week I have said "no" to Red Deer, Ottawa, Wetaskiwin, Harbour Front in Toronto, and India.

LF: Is there a positive addiction to writing, that makes you want to write every day?

AVH: No. It is not a positive addiction. For all one talks about writing and stories and entering the world of story, that moment that you sit down and face the blank page is the most ghastly moment of any person's day. It's hard. It's not fun.

LF: But does the pressure build up that you must write?

AVH: Well, that's the funny thing. It's kind of a curse. There is a certain stage when you just sit down and work. I don't know if it's a compulsion, or if the pressure builds up or what happens. For me it is an anger. It's a cumulative anger that I have to do it.

LF: But still you write?

AVH: Yeah. It's just an all-consuming anger. I have never really looked too closely at that.

LF: Is there a purging for you in writing?

AVH: No, I don't mean that. You write because you have to; it's a compulsion. I think the act of writing itself is an anger.

LF: Do you feel like Sisyphus?

AVH: No, it's not even that. I can't explain it. I don't know why I do it; I hate doing it. It's an awful way to make one's mark on the world.

LF: I feel like that's a lie.

AVH: It's the truth; I don't like it. I get pleasure out of working with words, but I don't enjoy the act of writing.

LF: You say you have (in your mind) all these characters who are more real than life in some ways, and you love that creative mulling, and you like what happens in working with words and with the tactile sense of writing and yet something negative seems to happen in the process of playing with the words as you write. What is it that happens to change from positive to negative?

AVH: I think the whole notion of what happens in your head intellectually is largely tied in with anticipation. Those are two motivating factors in human beings' lives: anticipation and memory. Very few people actually live in the present; they either live in the future or the past. For me the memories are mostly bad, but the anticipation is all good. I do think that people who live in the past don't live very effectively. So, I sit down with anticipation, but then I remember the hell it cost me to write No Fixed Address, for instance. That book cost me years of my life. Why don't I quit; why do I do it? I'd like to know. Writing is an anger, but not "I'm angry when I'm writing." It's like Dylan Thomas when he says, "Rage, Rage, against the dying of the light." He isn't talking about being mad; he's talking about a struggle.

LF: Are you talking about writing as the most authentic struggle you engage in?

AVH: Yes, it's the only struggle that I care to engage in; the only one I think that matters to me. I'm a very good teacher and I engage in that, but it isn't a struggle. I can stand up and perform without any struggle at all. All I have to do is be well prepared. That's very simple. That [teaching] is not something I engage in with rage.

LF: But you do struggle with words, language, description, and meaning, with rage?

AVH: Yes and in an integration of memory and anticipation.

LF: Are you ever afraid to write anything?

AVH: I have sometimes known that I was not ready to write a particular thing and I have put it away, left it until I knew I was more capable of a satisfactory ending.

LF: Fear sometimes?

AVH: I don't think that's fear.

LF: Unsureness of yourself?

AVH: It's good sense. Most writers want to put everything they know into their first novel, so they have four hundred characters, they travel all over the world, they hit revolutions, marriage, nine hundred generations--they've got it all. The smartest thing I learned, that I figured out myself, was that you take one character and put her in one place. If you can handle that, then maybe four hundred books from now, you could handle four hundred characters travelling all around the world. You have to recognize your own limitations. It isn't that I'm afraid. I'm not at all afraid.

LF: You're prepared to wait?

AVH: I'm prepared to wait until I can do them justice. As a writer you have a responsibility to do a story justice. Fiction demands that you must be equal to your subject. People would really disagree saying, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. How can you ever do it if you never try?" I don't really think that's true. The one thing about art is that it lets you know well and good how much you can do.

LF: Do you ever worry about the consequences of your writing?

AVH: I never worry about that. I don't know how that happened to me, because almost every writer in Canada looks over their shoulders. If you're always trying to look for the good in people that's a kind of looking over your shoulder. It does bother me if I should ever write the Dutch immigrant novel. There are probably things I should look over my shoulders about.

LF: Do you have a personal "censor system"?

AVH: No, I don't think it's so much a censor, but I look over my shoulder at the history of women. The story of women hovers at my back; the misinterpretation of our history. You made me begin thinking about this. When I say Jane Rule looks over her shoulder, it has made her a good writer of a particular sort. It can also serve as an unwillingness to deal with certain things, to evade things that might make someone a truly great writer.

LF: Yes, where there is fear or reluctance to deal with something, there are important human issues.

AVH: That's horrible for people around you. It makes them very uneasy: will they appear in my fiction, will they be eulogized? A painter friend of mine does portraits of women. One woman came and sat for her, and when she saw what the painter had done she said, "You can't do me." She subsequently wrote her a registered letter saying, "I will not sit for you."

The artist can do whatever she wants. The painter told me I was the only one who said she didn't care what she had done. And I don't care; it's HER painting. That's exactly how I feel about fiction. No one has any business saying anything about it. The truth comes out in various ways. Sometimes it's twisted, and twisted nastily. If it makes good stories, it's justified.

LF: Do you have an audience in mind when you write?

AVH: Students ask that a lot. We all have in our minds an image of the ideal reader. It is probably someone who is a combination Virginia Woolf and Einstein, one who understands everything that you put into the story implicitly. The ideal reader might turn out to be yourself. It's not an audience outside yourself.

LF: Do you have more of a sense of audience when you go to read aloud?

AVH: That's performance; that's quite different.

LF: Don't you have a sense of writing as performance?

AVH: No, I don't, which is probably a drawback. I've always believed it should be accessible, but it's still my interpretation as the ideal reader. I say to my students, "Formulate for yourselves the imaginary person you perceive as the ideal reader. That is your audience. Don't imagine your Mother. She either says, "That's nice dear," or she hates everything you do because mothers are like that. They're at one end of the spectrum or the other. Your ideal reader has to be separated from the life of responsibility, guilt, and duty.

LF: Once you've written a draft, what do you do with it?

AVH: Put it away; let it sit. Then I go back and look at it maybe two or three months later. I re-read it as if I were a total stranger. It's so easy to see what's wrong with it.

LF: You change roles: first you are writer, then reader, then editor, and then writer again?

AVH: Yes, and you have to distance yourself from a manuscript that you are writing. That's the good thing about creative writing classes; you're forced to be a reader as well as a writer.

LF: And take ownership for what you read and what you write?

AVH: Ownership, yes, and since it came out of your head and you want to believe it's good, distancing is really necessary. When I read a page and think it's awful, that's when I feel good because I know I have a healthy sense of what is going on. I get worried if I think something is wonderful.

LF: Do you have a plan for revision?

AVH: It has to work as a whole. And you have to look at it in terms of content, style, rhythm, speech. I have worked on individual scenes sometimes, but they have to be connected to the rest of them. That's the thing about a novel: it's an incredible structure. If you pull out one pillar, the rest of it will fall. Or you can constuct the most incredible pillar itself, but then how are you going to shove it into the building. You don't make bridges that way. You don't make buildings that way. You don't make writing that way. You often re-order things; it's not that I don't move things around. I do, but it's not like "legos" [the building toys] to me.

LF: How do you know when it is done?

AVH: Mystery to me. I've never finished.

LF: At what point are you willing to let it go?

AVH: It's Audrey Thomas, isn't it, who says, "A novel is never finished, it's only abandoned."

LF: When do you "abandon" your work? How do you know when to send it to your editor?

AVH: It's when you know you can't make it any better. You're often and inevitably dissatisfied. No Fixed Address--I hated that. I have hated that book since I started writing it and I've hated it since it was published.

LF: Do you think you hate it so much because it cost you so much?

AVH: Partly. It began as a very different book and evolved in a different direction. I was angry about my misconception of things, and I was also angry because probably I was working out of my depth. I'm happy I pulled it off. It's the best book I have written, but this is not an easy act to engage in. It's a very complex novel and also a very sad novel. The two earlier novels I wrote were quite happy books. This one is profoundly tragic. The whole comedy of the surface is undercut, and it's a really, really tragic book.

LF: She is lost?

AVH: And she is not going to find herself. And nobody is going to find her for her.

LF: And she, like us, is never going to have a "fixed address"?

AVH: Exactly, and that sadness infiltrates the entire work.

LF: Do you have people you rely on before you send your work to the publisher?

AVH: My editor. I trust her judgement implicitly. She's an extremely good editor and is editor of some of the finest novels in this country. If she says to me, "This is crap," I pay attention. She is the only person I will listen to.

LF: How do you evaluate your own work?

AVH: I see my own progression. I have my favourite stories, but like anything, favouritism is irrational. In another sense once they are finished and published, they are out there. They are past you, beyond you; they are not yours.

LF: Do you not still judge them?

AVH: No, it is then up to the world to judge them. I finished No Fixed Address most recently and it's closer to the kind of thinker I am now, so it's more interesting to me than Judith. It was a very good book; I have no problems with it, but it's a first novel. I don't compare them. It's not up to me to judge.

LF: Do you teach yourself from your writing?

AVH: Everytime you do it, you learn something.

LF: Have you ever abandoned or thrown away work in process?

AVH: Sometimes if it's really bad, I throw it away for all kinds of complicated reasons. I don't do that very often, though.

LF: Have you ever regretted throwing something away?

AVH: I regret that my old boyfriend burned all my letters. Those were good letters, but I didn't do that.

LF: Are there significant political or social influences on your writing?

AVH: The critics would contend that the feminist movement has really influenced my writing. It has influenced me and I am the author of my writing. I prefer strong women to whiny ones, but that does not mean that my writing is a speech for the feminist movement. It isn't. It's a political movement that has strongly influenced me in the way I think.

LF: But you are not making a conscious attempt to make feminist writing?

AVH: No, I am more interested in strong women characters than wimpy ones. I do parody feminists in No Fixed Address. I also parody artists in the sauna who are going to carve a statue of Isis out of Mount Lougheed. It is the artist visiting her novel; it is me saying, "Look, artists really do want to change the world." I like that scene very much because it is one scene where I permitted my own voice to come out including the gestures, foul language, and impatience. But that's only for three pages. My life has been profoundly changed because of the feminist group. It's just that I've never actually been politically a member of the feminist group. I do believe in the tenets of feminist proposals and I will fight for them in my own way, and support them because I think they are right.

LF: What about the influence of religion on you?

AVH: Having been raised in an adamant Dutch Calvinist Reformed Church, I'd have to say that one reason I know so many Bible stories is because they were drummed into me from the beginning to the end, so to speak. But, my spirituality comes from other sources and that's something that is very private to me. It doesn't mean I don't have any; I feel quite strongly about it.

My characters are strangely religious. They set themselves outside the context of what is moralistic. They don't seem constrained by the same things most of us expect. I suspect that one reason why people have a hard time with my novels is that my characters don't fit within the societal system of morality.

LF: What things do you still want to write?

AVH: I want to write a play. I'm really interested in the dramatic form because I think it has actually been constrained. I don't think I will be ready for a while, but I'm interested because it is the drama which carries, more than anything, in books.

LF: When you are working on a project does it suggest other projects?

AVH: Always, always. I will never run out. There are so many things to write.

LF: One idea and then a divergent explosion?

AVH: I love it.

LF: In the play you want to write do you have scenes in your mind, or story, or dialogue, or images?

AVH: They are mostly images, yes. They're not themes or statements of intent. I can give you an example of the kind of image I mean. The prairies are populated by male writers, W.O. Mitchell, Rudy Wiebe, and Robert Kroetsch and so on. Very few people knew Sharon Hauch, and Sharon Riis and Edna Alford, right? It's really hard for the women in the prairies to get a voice. I'm one of the few who has managed to get a squeaky little voice. I was giving a paper which was a piece of ficto-criticism about the subversive activities of women writers on the prairies. The whole paper came from an image of women in the country carrying inside, in the winter, sheets from the clothesline that have been frozen stiff into sails, almost literally sails. I've seen my mother do that when I was little. The image was that one day, one of those women would simply sail off into the light and disappear. I gave the paper in Sweden to a large conference and everyone was stunned. The power is not in talking about Edna Alford or Sharon Pollock, but in relating them to a metaphor like that.

I carried that image around in my head for months before it ever came out and when it did, it came out very well. The images I carry are experiences we all share and yet it's so ordinary that one would almost never even think of it. That's the writer's real job, to translate the ordinary into the magical.

LF: You talk of anger; are there other emotions like a sense of pain or alienation or sensitivity that make you somehow see differently?

AVH: Oh well, these are the things that make you a writer. Isolation, extreme sensitivity--I am oversensitive to nuance, to tone, to slight inflexion much more than other people. All of those work together to make you an artist. One becomes honed. You vibrate at a pitch that is quite different from most people I think. And all of that feeds one's anger and then goes into the art. I don't think art is just purgation though. It is much more complex than that. But that sensitivity informs the refined anger that one brings to an incredibly important act. That makes one terribly difficult to live with. We need a system of supporting members who just pay a yearly membership fee, and who would be interested in making sure that such a cultural institution continues.

I think often that writers write in reaction to a feeling of alienation. I also wonder, if you were constantly supported and encouraged and rewarded for writing, whether that would turn you into an absolutely wonderful, wonderful writer.

LF: Do you have that kind of acceptance from someone?

AVH: Love and support? Yes, I do personally. I have a very strong network of friends who support me quite a lot. There is certainly that sense from Bob [husband] that my work is very important and that I must take a real pride in what I do. That is true of some of my personal friends too. But, very few people are going to give you that. It's like the mother who says, "That's lovely, dear," no matter what you do. In some ways that's what Bob does. I could write crap and he would tell me it's wonderful, and writers need that. The ideal [support] is someone who will make you a cup of tea when you come home. It isn't someone who goes over and sits down and starts criticizing and says, "If you change this word it will be a lot better."

LF: Do you think that unconditional acceptance allows you to take greater risks?

AVH: Yes, I can think of some very good examples of women where their significant others are quite negative about what they do, and that's very hard for a woman whose husband doesn't think that her writing is worth the time she invests in it. I have seen that over and over with women who are trying to make a writing career.

Relationships are a very intricate personal knot: the people who are willing to support all the idiosyncracies and the erratic negativeness of being the friend, the lover, the husband, the wife, of an artist. The allowances one must make for being in close conjunction with an artist are many. They are erratic and unpredictable and often in a bad mood. They're not good friends, they're not thoughtful people. They are egocentric because they live inside the head so much; the common courtesies are things they often neglect.

LF: Not out of malicious intent.

AVH: No, it's not maliciousness. It is a kind of egocentrism. They are not the kind of people that make good lovers or good spouses, or necessarily good parents either. I can see you'll probably get lots of disagreement about this from other people, but I think it's true.

The way I live is a chosen way. I'm going to be bitchy and I'm going to indulge my art, and the poor people who surround me are going to have to put up with it or leave. Fortunately I have good friends, and I have a good husband who puts up with it and who thinks I must be worth the sacrifice.

The second thing is the pretence that the artist is just an ordinary guy who has an ordinary job. When he comes home he's just like Joe Blue-collar-worker. That's someone who never conducts his writing or bitchiness inside the walls of his home.

Thirdly, there's absolute antagonism, where it [the home situation] inevitably cracks up, where the world does shatter.

There's a fourth, and most dangerous [relationship for the artist] where the artist marries his best critic, whatever sex that may be. The poet who marries the other poet. Then your personal world becomes an incestuous extension of your artistic world. And I don't buy that.

LF: It seems to me that you keep your personal life and your literary life quite separate, but to what degree do your real life experiences influence your literary life?

AVH: What's real life? I've always thought that what I was living out on the street was fiction, and what I was living at the typewriter was real.

LF: Yes, but presumably you are not recording biography when you write and yet there are things from your daily living that create images for you as you said. Daily living provides source materials for writing, to some extent, don't you agree?

AVH: Well, writers write about what they know, but you have to think of writers as translators. If I see a guy on a bus with a funny nose and three years later I have a character who has a funny nose, maybe I got that from the guy on the bus, but the voice will come from someone else, the feet from someone else again.

LF: So you don't translate autobiography.

AVH: No, never. The autobiographical fallacy that critics repeatedly fall into, which tells you how much the critics of Canada are capable of dealing with the writers of Canada, is the most terrifying trap. I've seen it amongst my own colleagues. For instance, if Alice Munro writes a story about a woman who has cerebral palsy, and if her own mother had cerebral palsy, that this is somehow the story of her life. It is a stupid approach to literature, and a stupid approach to life. The notion that the translation is an accurate representation of real life is crazy. It's like that famous painting called "This is not a pipe." It's not a pipe, right? It's a picture of a pipe, a painting of a pipe. And the novel is not real life being represented for you on the page. It is not. It is a story.

LF: When readers ask you then, "How much of this story is true?", what do you think they are asking behind the obvious question?

AVH: That question stems from the perennial curiosity of where artists get their ideas. Where does art come from." It goes back to the age-old questions of "Where does man come from?", and "Where does fire come from?"

LF: Is "How much of this is true?" a primordial question?

AVH: Yes, it's a primordial question about how I was born. "How was this idea born?" If they can find a reason like it really happened to you, so you wrote a story about it, they say, "Huh, there's a logical reason for this." It's the longing for human beings to have logical reasons, even for things that are not logical.

LF: But why are people concerned with truth in fiction. What constitutes the truth for you in fiction? Is it a question of plausibility?

AVH: No, never. The trueness in fiction is if it is itself a whole and unified story that can move people in some way. It has nothing to do with whether it actually happens in the real world. If I took an event that happened to me, and tried to write a literal story about it, by the time it had happened to me, gone through my head, come out on the page, read by the reader, gone through the reader's head, and come out of his mouth, it would have undergone at least six transformations. Every translation is another transformation, and all art is an act of translation. It is not literal.

LF: But there is an essential kind of truth or authenticity about it, is there not, and I'm wondering if that's what readers "need" to know when they ask if it's true.

AVH: That is where the question comes from, but they are always dissatisfied if you say, "No, it didn't happen to me."

LF: Oh, the voyeurism in us as reader!

AVH: And they think, "She's lying," so you always give them some kinds of basic answers. I tell them a whole range of things from no, to yes, to in between. You inevitably just tell them another story. It's like

Jesus: when people asked him a direct question, he told them a story. It's all parables. There are no answers to those questions of "Where did we come from?" and "Is there a God?" and "Did God create humans?"

LF: For you then, the truthfulness comes within the story?

AVH: Yes, inherent in the story, but fiction writers are the best liars in the world.

LF: Do you have a voice that gives you the "lies"?

AVH: No, I don't think it's the voice; it's energy. There are images that are not even pictures that are a blurred combination of language and picture and sound, probably because I try to be a very sensory writer. Scenes have a taste, a sound, so that they are not just pictures.

LF: Does that mean you have interest around that in terms of drama, to explore voice more?

AVH: Yes, probably. Dialogue is something that I was never really interested in and never very good at. Sometimes I can catch an authentic voice--in The Tent Peg the characters are all voices talking, but the truth is they are interior monologues, not overt dialogue.

LF: Each of those interior monologues, those character "voices", are different strings of your own voice in the world.

AVH: I do that same thing visually with myself. Now this might be a reflection of other people, but some days I'll walk down the street and my best friends won't recognize me. I've changed my image. I practice that a lot to protect myself. I want to be safe from scrutiny, and I'm really pleased with the ability to don disguises. When I say a series of images, it's also a series of disguises or a series of situations you can enter as the stranger.

LF: In your different disguises, do you see different images?

AVH: Sure, of course. There are many different ones, not just one coherent image.

LF: Do you see writing as a way of re-inventing the way things are or the way they could be?

AVH: I used to think that, but I was really dissatisfied with my world and what I could do in writing was create a world that I was happier with. That's not so true anymore. The last novel especially has taught me that in the end there is some real sadness at stake. It's re-invention, but also with a recognition that the tragic elements will persist.

LF: Some people also say that writing is a way of externalizing the world to make more sense of it or to solve problems: do you agree with that?

AVH: I don't think they are solving it. Articulating some things is important. I think of a writer as certainly a social and political critic in some ways, but art presents dilemmas; it never solves them. I don't think good art offers you very many answers.

LF: Is there a personal notion of making sense of something through the writing of it?

AVH: No, more in terms of images I want to explore. I don't want to make sense of them. Sometimes they just get more complicated. I don't believe that writing is psychotherapy. I don't think that the intricate involvement of the imagination is going to solve one's sense of horror, or a bad marriage. I don't believe that what you are doing is resolving, although writing has been used for this--the resolving of people's psychological dilemmas. I think that is wrong. Art is not the place for us to spill our personal guts. It seems to me that you have a responsibility as an artist to go beyond your own puny psychotherapy which is pretty small and unimportant.

LF: Do you write that personal stuff out anywhere?

AVH: No. If I am going to have psychotherapy I go and lift weights or run to the back section [of a farm]. But the head is too pristine to muddy up. If I feel bad I cry; if I'm mad, I scream. If I need to get away, I run to the back section. I act it out. You don't drag that stuff along with you when you write, because you end up writing bad stuff.

LF: Are you conscious of sorting that out?

AVH: Sure.

LF: Where does your disgust for that kind of public psychotherapy come from, that you think it obscene to put those private things down and call it writing?

AVH: Well, we all put private things into our writing.

LF: What constitutes private?

AVH: There's a difference between putting private things into your writing, and giving yourself a psychological healing by using the writing process of making art as a form of resolving your own psychological problems. My struggle is with my story, not with my personal problems. Someone who uses writing as psychotherapy is struggling with their problems and the writing becomes secondary to the problems.

LF: And for you the writing is primary?

AVH: For me, the writing is primary. My problems don't have much business in there. If I need psychotherapy then I better go to a shrink [otherwise] I don't think I'll be writing very good stuff. Treating yourself by saying if you write this down, you'll not only have a great novel, but you'll have worked out all your feelings about your mother? I mean, wait a minute! You could go out and throw-up too!

LF: What is the responsibility of a writer in society now?

AVH: It is to make the most beautiful story you can. Nothing teaches better than beauty, however you want to define that. If you can do that, it's the ultimate. It is what everyone should long for. Should we not long for beauty? That's one of the enormous problems that we face in the world: that nobody longs for beauty anymore. They look for security. They long for the stupidest things and nobody longs for beauty. I have a great sympathy for the Romantics because of that pure attachment to beauty. Instead we have this thing that we are all social protesters. But if the story is beautiful enough, it will teach too.

Aritha van Herk   Teaching Interview   February 6, 1987

LF: How long have you been teaching?

AVH: I began teaching when I was a graduate student, as a teaching assistant in literature at the University of Alberta. Then I went to the University of British Columbia in 1980 for two years. I had a sessional job teaching literature and composition. I also started teaching creative writing. From 1981 on, I have been teaching creative writing. We are all required to teach one freshman course. Every professor, no matter how senile, how "big shot", how important, teaches a junior course. I have also been teaching a lot of workshops.

LF: Are the workshops always at the university?

AVH: No, at colleges, and various summer schools of the arts.

LF: Do you have anything to do with primary and secondary schools?

AVH: It is really hard for a person to conduct workshops in high school. I don't do that very much. I just do readings. "Here is a writer; look, writers have two legs."

LF: You've had experience then, of teaching compulsory courses and also creative writing which is presumably of an elective nature?

AVH: Creative writing is totally elective. At UBC English 100 was required for every student who ever entered the portals of that university. That was hell. It was apparently the biggest freshman English course in North America. Here, in Calgary, students are required to take some kind of freshman arts elective. Many faculties do require freshman English. They have several courses that they can choose from, but the most common one is English 202--which is a combination of English 200 (which is survey, so they get exposed to all three genres) and composition.

LF: Do you have a class limit here for the number of students?

AVH: For freshman I think it is thirty-five. Creative writing the limit is seventeen.

LF: How was that magic number arrived at?

AVH: I don't know; it was arrived at without my consultation, but it's a good number. Slightly too large. I would be happier if creative writing classes had a limit of a dozen but seventeen works. Inevitably, two people drop out. It's workable as a seminar anyway. If you do five stories a night, when they have to hand in one story every three weeks it's about what the students expect anyway.

LF: Is there a big difference for you depending on whether you are teaching creative writing and teaching compulsory composition?

AVH: An incredible difference. The composition course is taught as lecture and discussion. Creative writing is always taught as a workshop. I would do workshops in composition if it was a purely composition course, but not in combination with a literature course where I try to make them write literature essays.

At UBC the limit was about twenty-eight. Everyone was told what to teach and how many essays to assign. The requirement was 10 essays a year. I was marking an essay every two weeks. The students were really under pressure, but it was a good course.

LF: Did you have a sense of teaching and learning and improvement in writing in those courses?

AVH: Very much so. You can't enter a creative writing course here without having a freshman English course.

LF: Do you set up a certain kind of atmosphere for students at the beginning of a course, with stated rules?

AVH: Yes. We have very particular rules. I don't care how shy you are, you have to talk. How do you expect other people to criticize your work if you refuse to say anything. The rules are you must hand in a certain amount of work every three weeks. You must hand in work or you will be barred from class. Oh, I'm flexible; I'll give them a week or two, but they must produce consistently. The rules are we talk about what is on the page. We do not talk about what the story could have been, but we do talk about what is in the story--what works and what doesn't work. When a story is being discussed, we sit in a circle. The student whose work it is may not speak. They may not speak because it totally deflects coherent discussion and it makes the writer call upon the pity of the rest of the group. The group can say, "I see that" and then the discussion becomes guided, when in point of fact it isn't in the story at all, and it can't "be seen" at all.

The writer gets a say after the discussion is over. They can ask questions or make comments at the conclusion.

LF: Before the "tearing apart" comes, do you work at trying to establish a sense of community, safety, and freedom within the bounds of that classroom?

AVH: I am quite hard-nosed about it. My first lecture tells them all things about this wonderful course. They are getting credit to do something they would do anyway. They are going to complain about having to read seventeen other people's works, but they are fortunate because there is a captive audience of seventeen people which out in the real world I'm sure they don't have. I explain to them my philosophy of the class, that it's very tough, but we are not here for therapy, we're here to try to be professional writers. There are a couple of things that are very important. First of all, they have to be confident that the class is totally confidential. I tell them that in this class they may talk about each other's work, or may talk to each other, but they never take another student's short story home and show it to someone else. They never discuss what goes on in the class outside the classroom walls. They do not talk about other students' work, and respect their privacy as much as they want their own to be respected. What students write is completely confidential.

LF: You protect them from themselves so that they don't run off and show half drafts to people?

AVH: Yes, and say things like, "Look at this sexy story that girl who sits next to me in class wrote today" to their friend Jim. I tell them if I catch them doing that, they are out. I'll find out; those things get back. It's partly reassurance that what they hand in is in confidence. No one is going to talk about it, no one outside the class will ever see it. They are safe.

LF: You use the students for audience. Do you have things you don't allow them to say in that capacity?

AVH: I don't allow them to say personal things like "Are you ever dumb!"

LF: It is always story centered.

AVH: I teach them that you don't talk about the person. You don't go off on a tangent if the story is about someone who is molested as a child and say, "Well, my grandmother's aunt Ruth was molested when she was a child." To that sort of thing, I will say, "What are you talking about? This is not a group therapy session; this is not 'touchy-feely'." It is a real problem for some students who do enter the class thinking that writing is going to save their lives.

They are not permitted to indulge in personal reminiscences. They are permitted any literary reference they wish to make. When they come to this class they are to bring a little black book because we are going to talk about more novels and short stories that they have not read and will not be able to read in the course of the year, but that will provide them with summer reading for the next eighteen years. They can't write about this until they've read it.

LF: Always the connection between their writings and other writings?

AVH: Yes, the basic thing when the class begins is a reassurance first that this is professional and this is an opportunity for them to be like professional writers in terms of audience and criticism. The second thing is that they can trust the class. They do not have to withold anything because the class will not betray their confidence.

LF: Is that how you get around the business of the unnatural, non-private process of the classroom?

AVH: That's very important. They respect other people's stuff because they want theirs respected.

LF: Do unto others before they do unto you?

AVH: That's exactly right. They don't want their stuff talked about. Also there is the whole notion that in the end, they too are responsible critics. They are taking the course not just to learn writing style, but to read it and participate in the sometimes very tense analysis of literature, not of feelings, not of personal lives, but writing.

LF: Do you provide suggestions for structure of criticism?

AVH: No, why? You are the prof. When they say, "I sure don't like this," you ask why and make them be very specific.

LF: It's a utilitarian thing then?

AVH: Very utilitarian. They have to have a reason. If a character doesn't work there's always a reason. If the story is stupid, the setting inappropriate, there's always a reason.

LF: You are developing the writer as reader so they can turn around and look at their own work, hopefully as a more informed reader and then editor?

AVH: If you are not your own best critic, you can't do it. It's always easier to see the errors in someone else's story than in your own. Students whose stories are under discussion inevitably takes copious notes and they say that when they go and rewrite, it's absolutely wonderful to have them.

LF: Are they mainly bringing first draft writing?

AVH: Not necessarily. I tell them to hand in a story every three weeks but it shouldn't be the variety where they sat down and typed it out the night before. I expect a finished story of some sort. It depends on the course level: in 366 it will usually be a first draft; in 407 I tell them that I expect the story to be more polished.

LF: Do they have the sense though that even a polished story is not finished copy?

AVH: No, although they have the opportunity once in the year to hand in a significant rewrite for the same credit as a new story. In 598, the stories have to be really polished.

LF: Most of your creative writing class consists of students bringing stories they have written and then talking about them, is that right?

AVH: Students type their stories up and drop them off at the English department. The stories are duplicated and handed out for the students to take home. They spend the next week reading the stories for the next class so we are working two weeks ahead of ourselves. They are reading, making comments, notes, making a written criticism, usually just a paragraph which they hand in to me. I read their written criticisms and then hand them on to the writer.

As well, we have a whole verbal discussion. They have one whole week to read five stories and time to think about them to decide what to do, because everytime I just pick students at random to talk in class. If they are first they better be ready, right? If someone says they haven't read a story, I just tear into them, because the basic premise is that if you want other people to read your story, you better read theirs. Some people have said to me, "I wanna write, I don't have time to read all this crap." I tell them that the other students don't have time to read all your crap either.

LF: You teach through questions obviously, in a sort of Socratic dialogue with students, but do you prepare lectures and talk about writing in more general terms. Do you talk about inspiration or creativity or those kinds of things in a formal way?

AVH: It's funny. I have this little list of notes. The minute you began to talk about inspiration reminded me that one of the first things I say at the beginning of class is that there is no such thing as a dry spell. Broken fingers don't carry any weight. You are a novice; you don't have a dry spell and that's all there is to it. That's a romantic notion. Some days you can't write but there is no such thing as sitting there for ten years locked in silence. You may write stuff that doesn't work and that may get dispelled quickly. Once `dry spell' or `writer's block' gets banned from their vocabulary, they don't use it.

In the first year section, I give a series of lectures on fiction--the elements of fiction. In 366, I spend three hours the first week in lecture, and then half an hour at the beginning for the first half of the term on points of view. One class on third person, one on first, one on stream-of-consciousness, one on character, one on classical plot, one on frame stories. I show them a lot of what they may actually already be using, but they don't know the technicalities. We talk about all the elements.

LF: Do you do that in conjunction with published literaty samples to illustrate those aspects of fiction?

AVH: Often with literary samples, sometimes just abstractly. Often things will appear in their stories that give rise to questions about something, and they look at me, so I explain it to them.

LF: The teaching often comes out of the working of the class?

AVH: Yes. I give them the basic series of lectures but more of the teaching just comes naturally out of the class. I usually use a really good selection of stories, an anthology that is maybe eight hundred pages long and has really all the best world-recognized stories in it. I also use a Canadian anthology like West of Fiction. I do that both because I want them to know about story in their own place, and because I want them to know about world stories.

I always remember the student who wrote a story about Bowness. Another student had been told in a class that you can't write about Bowness, nobody in the world knows where it is. That was perfect for a very long and totally canned lecture in my head about nothing exists until you tell a story about it and of course you can tell a story about Bowness. The way to make Bowness famous is to write the greatest story possible about it. That kid loved the class, but at first, he thought we should be writing stories about guys in Vietnam, when he had never been close to a jungle, let alone a gun.

Those kids think what they really want to do is write Television, but they rapidly learn that that's not what they are going to learn in these classes. I have students who write science fiction, who write mysteries, who write magic realism, who write straight realism. We treat them all the same. I feel reasonably comfortable with all of these different kinds of stories. I don't believe that they should be writing only literary works; it just has to be good writing.

LF: People sometimes talk about the writing before it happens--

AVH: The process? You are not actually going to ask me this question are you?

LF: Yes, I am. I want to get to it because a lot of people do it in the classroom. Brainstorming is thought by many as a kind of fuel for the writing. What do you have to say about encouraging prewriting talk?

AVH: The students, because they enter the class by portfolio, already have a way of writing. I don't tell them the way to get ideas is to 'freefall'. Some of them use freefall; others don't. Some will ask what it is and I will explain it to them. We talk about how to get going if they can't. I tell them they can read a book, which is the way I get going. They can read over the paragraph they wrote yesterday. I give them information about all the methods for getting going. I tell them to devise a way that works best for them. I'm only here to help them achieve what they want to achieve.

LF: Is that different if you're in a composition class?

AVH: That's totally different. If you say to students, "Write me a description of a room" it's very dictatorial.

LF: Does the assignment dictate the kind of writing?

AVH: Of course it does. I have said to my creative writing students, "Write a story" but it is always "Write a story about a character that you have never met and that you can only understand from an empty room that they inhabit." But I would never give that to a composition student. One is creation of character and one is simple description. It's a whole different kettle of fish.

The one thing that I suggest to them is that they must set aside a certain point every day, a certain amount of time in their lives that belongs to writing. They must protect that time and they must isolate themselves from all the other things in the world and this should be the same time everyday. They are going to have a hard time keeping up with the class or meeting the assignments or actually writing if they don't treat it as a professional business. I don't care if they do it at three in the morning, or late at night, or noon time. "Don't wait for inspiration to strike, just set yourself up with that kind of habit because once you get into the habit it will always be easier."

LF: Do you talk about your patterns of writing?

AVH: I don't talk about myself, hardly at all--I don't really have any set theories. I have had freefall students and I have had totally structured students.

LF: It doesn't matter to you as long as it works. If something isn't working then you might suggest some other way or thing to try, is that right?

AVH: You're quite right. We look at the product. Because it's product-oriented, we get past a lot of the `flim-flam' that goes into the process. Too many writing courses are taught on the basis of process, where everyone is going around beating the breast and saying, "Oh, did you freefall last night?" I'm sorry, but no, we are not going to hand in at-the-end-of-the-class stories. They are complete entities when we look at them. "I don't care how you get them. You work that out yourself. I am not mucking around in your creative process. You always have to work that out for yourself. That's a private arrangement with God. And you are going to have to look at what you write."

LF: Are your assignments fairly open ones in terms of content?

AVH: They can write about anything they want.

LF: Do you have minimum length requirements?

AVH: No, if it's a really good one-page story, why should I complain? If they come to me with a sixty-page story and ask if it could count for two stories, I say yes. On the whole, what they can work with is the average ten-page story. Once in a while, I will give a specific assignment like describing a character, if I think they are wandering all over the place with character. They think that if Jack has a bristly moustache, he's sinister. Their classic thing about writing character includes he had brown hair and blue eyes. I tell them, "I walk out of this room at night and I don't know what color any of your hair is, but I know Jim's got a hairlip and Mary walks with a shuffle and Jean wears brown thick glasses. What is this about brown hair and blue eyes?" You sometimes really have to force them to perceive beyond the usual perception which is so very much television oriented, and very superficial.

LF: Your teaching then, is in terms of questions to the students that make them see more clearly?

AVH: Sure. It's wonderful, because teaching creative writing is like nothing else. First of all it's a performance. You can just sit up and say, "This is how you make a short story." It is a performance and an improvisation. You have to be on your toes at any given minute. You have to be willing to respond to them, to guide them. You have to know how to make them aware, for example, that a chair is not "a useful piece of furniture, but a broken-legged, black leather bound--." The notion of precision is really what you instill in them, especially in the first year. In the second year what you teach them is structure. In the third year, there is more teaching about experimentation.

LF: Do you ever have creative writing students actually write in the classroom?

AVH: Never. You don't use the classroom to write. You write on your own time. The classroom is used for learning. Don't write in the classroom. It's a useless exercise.

LF: Do you have students from the composition classes write in class?

AVH: Yes. We are required to, but that is so we know it is their writing. But writing students never write in the classroom, nor do they read their stories aloud. That is the lazy technique by a teacher who doesn't want to talk about writing and who wants to waste as much time as possible having the students read their stories out loud. Then it becomes a drama class. The best readers are the ones with the best stories.

LF: The focal point of the discussion then is always the story at hand. Do you all look through the text and discuss certain parts of it?

AVH: It's like a group of critics sitting around reading Timothy Findley. They talk about the book. Students' lives, how they write, or how they read aloud are things they do on their own time. In class, it's totally product-oriented.

LF: You mentioned that you don't involve yourself with the process of a student. If asked, what sort of help are you prepared to give?

AVH: It would depend on what I was asked. If someone said to me, "I can't sit down at a typewriter for four hours," I'd say, "Then tie yourself down for an hour!" Such stupid questions. What kind of questions about process could you ask?

LF: A student might come and say, "Look, I am having trouble getting point of view consistent, or developing character." If a student comes to your office and asks you to "read this page and tell me what you think," would you?

AVH: They very seldom do that actually. I have very few requests about that. They have come and said, "If you do this, can you do that?" I say to them, "You can do anything. Does it work?" They may say they don't know but they think it does. I say, "Well, try it. We'll tell you in class if it works or not."

LF: Wait for the trial by fire?

AVH: The fact of the matter is they don't bring me pieces of stories. There is not much point. An isolated page tells me nothing. This page may work very well if I read the other twenty pages. I might think it is awful, but it might work very well within the context. Or I may think it is really good and then when I see it in context, I realize it is all wrong.

LF: A focus on an holistic appoach?

AVH: Yes. It's like someone bringing you a sentence and saying wonderful sentence, perfect and then asking you "Am I a writer? " Well, it's a beautiful sentence, but that does not tell me anything. That is a real trend in creative writing classes and workshops. There is too much concentration on how you do it, the concentration on the the stuff I call the "lucky rabbit's foot" crap. If I put my pencils at right angles to my nose and my lucky rabbit's foot and my coffee cup with the whatever on it, then I can do it. Maybe that's true, but it doesn't have anything to do with the product.

LF: Is there a point at which you talk about audience to your classes?

AVH: The question invariably comes up sometimes, "Who would ever want to read this?" In classes of seventeen students you get what is actually a fairly good representation of a cross-section audience. You get students who are good readers, students who are careless readers, students who are very imaginative readers that will fill in the blanks that are not in the story at all. They have an opportunity to talk about audience, but mostly they learn that we don't write for an audience so much as we write the best possible story. But they do have to write a story that is accessible.

LF: Do you talk about rewriting?

AVH: We talk about revision all the time. We sometimes will just edit a page because students overwrite dreadfully. It isn't enough that a man is a fat man; he has to be short, ugly, fat--the propensity for adjectives is unbelievable. They simply don't trust the language.

LF: Do they watch you edit a page?

AVH: We do it together. Everyone is working with a copy of the story. People make suggestions. Part of it is also saying, "This would work better," or "This is really good." There is a lot of praise in class. One shouldn't underestimate that. It is just that it is quite tough. Inevitably you will get a student who writes one story and rewrites it eight time and hands in the same damn thing. That's why there's a rule that they can't do that. They can only revise one story for credit. But they can revise all their stories and bring them to me. I will look at them in private consultation. Then those stories become part of their file.

LF: How do you evaluate student writing?

AVH: People believe that creative writing courses should have no marks. I think this is incorrect. I very well know the difference between a student who is a "B" writer and a student who is a "C" writer and a student who is an "A" writer. I am perfectly aware of a difference in quality, and they are given marks accordingly, although I don't put marks on individual stories.

In the middle of the year I write a two-page analysis that talks about their writing, their class participation, their criticism, how much they have improved, what I perceive as their strong points, what I perceive as their weak points, and what they need to concentrate on, along with a mark. It is in a written report of some magnitude. It is very precise based on their file. Most first stories, for instance, are terrible. I would give most of those an "F", but I don't think there is much point in me putting that on an individual story. But by Christmas time, I have a very good sense, having worked with them for four months, of their progression, what they are good at, what they need to work on, and it's a good time to give them a mark based on oral criticism, written criticism, and writing. At least by Christmas, they have gotten over most of the horrible humps. I will say to them, "This is the best story you have ever written." One compares what they are doing with what they have done before. I can say, "This is really better than the last things you have done." Or I can ask, "What happened to you, you've never written a story this awful in all the time you've been in this class?." They have comparisons and verbal evaluations on each story, just no grade. The written comments from the other students are evaluative, qualitative comments.

LF: Do you have frustrations or difficulties in evaluating?

AVH: No, I don't. The fact of the matter is that I judge them on the quality of the work they produce, not on their intentions. It is not being a writer that is important, it is what is produced. One can only be a writer based on what you write. That's a tough departmental standard and they hate it, but they come back at the end of the year and say they have learned so much from the course. I've never had a student who objected administratively. But I was going to say more about evaluation. At the end of the year, I give them a final evaluation and that is when their grade is determined.

A Chinese student was writing stories about "boy meets girl"; "boy falls for girl; "girl goes out with boy's best friend," right? I said, "What are you doing? This is television, this is Three's Company." Finally in the middle of March, he hands in this story about a group of Chinese women playing mahjong. It was incredible. Suddenly he had the nerve, but it took him that long and he could have spent his whole life writing "boy meets girl" stories. That kind of story comes out of his experience, but it's also very daring to chronicle a world he knows. What do Chinese ladies in Calgary do in their spare time? I gave the kid an "A" without hesitation. By the end of the year, he had written three of those Chinese stories. Before that, he had had seven junk stories. Since then he has been writing wonderful stories. He's publishing them all over. He is going to have a manuscript soon.

LF: Do you make comments on the story itself?

AVH: All the way through the story and at the end of the story too. You have a big paragraph of writing, sometimes two pages about it. As well, every member of the class writes a paragraph and we have a whole verbal discussion. We have five stories a night and the class is technically three hours long but van Herk is famous for her 6:30 to 11:00 p.m. classes. If anybody has any objections they can leave, but nobody ever leaves.

LF: Do you explain your system of evaluation do them?

AVH: I tell them I am looking for technical skill and originality. I tell them on what basis I will grade their technical finesse, their ability to handle dialogue, structure, characterization, their control of the story, and the meaningfulness of the story in terms of what it actually conveys. I tell them very quickly that there is no room in this class for--I mean, I have had students who have said to me, "I want to write for television", and I tell them to go away and learn somewhere else. This is a literary class. We teach within the university as if you all want to be writers of great literature. The department has backed me all the way. We are not in the business of teaching people how to be great romance writers. We are not in the business of teaching how to make money. I love teaching teaching at the university because you don't fool around.

LF: What about evaluation in the freshman composition classes?

AVH: It's very similar, just not creative. When I ask a student to describe a room, the kid just says there was a couch, there was a chair, there were four magazines.

LF: There are more restrictions placed around a particular assignment in a composition class, but are you not still asking for the same kind of writing?

AVH: That example I gave though, is totally unoriginal and dull so the kid will get an "F", especially if he demonstrates that he can't string long sentences together. Composition courses are largely marking on the basis of the students' ability to write grammatically, showing some sophistocation of the writing techniques. When you are dealing with grammar areas in writing, that's a whole different kettle of fish. You are not dealing with the intricacies of content and form merged together in a story. When you are teaching composition or creative writing, it's like the difference between making stew and making bouillabaisse with delicate herbs. One person is being taught bread and butter, the difference between its and it's. Composition is bottom level.

LF: Are you saying that people in your creative writing classes don't have those difficulties?

AVH: Oh no, they do. But you have to have a basic awareness of English. It's a problem when you have a student who doesn't know the difference between its and it's and thinks he's Proust.

LF: At what level do you think someone earns the right to be a "creative writer"?

AVH: Not until they have control over the language, no matter what academic year level they are at.

LF: But how do they get control other than by doing it?

AVH: By practice.

LF: Exactly, so how soon should a child start creative writing, Aritha?

AVH: I think you should teach creative writing to students like piano lessons. We understand that a kid can't compose a concerto until he has learned the scales. You don't give a kid two years of lessons and then say, "Okay, dear, go away and come back with a composition for me" and expect him to come back with something very complicated.

LF: But maybe the reason we don't have as many writers as we might is precisely that. They get the mechanical scale and drill until they are in grade twelve, take one compulsory English course in university, and then they are off into the wide, beautiful world, and hate writing forever. What a "screwed-up" system!

AVH: Well, we assume that because everyone has language in mouth, that we can suddenly and magically use it as an art. That is not true. I don't think every kid is an undiscovered genius. What we are basically teaching the average person is how to use the language proficiently enough to get along in the world, and it they can use it really well, they can get along better. It is the best power tool a person has. Someone who shows an incredible proficiency for language should be encouraged to go on and use it in creative ways.

LF: How do you think classroom teachers prepare themselves to notice such things? You had only one or two teachers who paid any attention to you--

AVH: I had incredible proficiency with langauge. It sounds elitist and nasty but they didn't pay that attention to other students. But the fact of the matter is that not everyone is capable of doing that. For most people, language is a tool at their hands that they use without thinking.

LF: But how does one teach people to get closer and closer to saying what they mean? Isn't that what we are doing at all levels of writing instruction, compositional or creative?

AVH: Sure, but you have to show an affinity for it. The educational system needs to be sensitive to the individual skills and talents of each student. That's why large classes are such a curse. You can see that Johnny is good at music, and Mary is good at words; Peter is good at drawing, and Jimmy loves the computer. You have to sort them out. I am not suggesting that we get streamed and narrow-edged, but there should be enough space for a classroom teacher to recognize that certain areas can be pushed and encouraged. It is useful to teach creative writing in high school as an exercise. Of the seventeen students I have had every year, two of them are going to go on and actually do it. And it will take them a very long time. That's a high average.

LF: How does one teach writing? Can it be taught?

AVH: Sure it can. Well, writing itself cannot be taught, but all you can do is give the students an opportunity to improve. What you are doing is providing them with a new view and an atmosphere within which they can develop and explore their own talent.

LF: The pace, space, and time to see what they need?

AVH: The pace, and the time, but also the encouragement. You are providing them with the ideal circumstances under which to realize whatever talent they have. If they are going to do it, they are going to do it under those circumstances. One-fifth of their course load is for writing. They have the encouragement, they have a reader, they have motivation for a grade, and they have everything a writer could want except money.

LF: Do you think anybody can learn to teach writing?

AVH: No.

LF: Do you think that teachers who do not write themselves have a handicap?

AVH: Yes. For one thing, students who want to be writers don't want to believe what someone who isn't a writer says. If I walked into a class and said, "Okay, I'm going to teach you how to write" and they ask me, "What have you published?" I don't lose my credibility.

LF: Do you think the idea of apprenticeship is involved here, that a teacher must have already completed her own apprenticeship before she has the right to teach?

AVH: Sure, and the notion of having practised all aspects of the field for a long time. I really do know what I am doing with language. There's a very powerful sense if you have a teacher who has done it professionally. The best way to study creative writing is to go and work with that writer. If I think what shows in their literature is what I would want to have in mine, then I would want to study with them. That doesn't mean you imitate them, but you learn what they know about language. I chose to study with Rudy Wiebe because he was a Westerner and had a strong sense of regionalism, because he is extremely dedicated to technical proficiency and I am a stickler for that, and because he also has a powerful, powerful approach to discipline.

LF: Are there differences between the way you were taught and the way you teach now?

AVH: I am less hard on my students. We crack more jokes; we talk a lot more. Rudy was a fierce teacher who would lay down edicts. The first thing he ever said to one of my stories was "This is exactly the kind of story you should never write."

My appraoch in the class is "You are professional, and you may not be up to my level, but you are my equal. I am here to tell you how to do things, here to help you do what you do better. You don't have to listen to me; you can reject what I say. We are all writers here and I respect you the same way you respect me."

LF: So your model is a co-writer with your students?

AVH: Yes. They sometimes say to me, "How does this work?" When I tell them I don't know, they look at me horrified. There are some things that are mysterious. There is no answer, or it will come clear eventually. Some other teachers would never say that.

LF: Do you deal with bad writing by suggesting to make certain things more specific or explicit or leave it?

AVH: Yes, some people think that it's a wonderful thing to have these mysterious references to something that happens beyond the pages of the story, but it is just cheap thrills. What works is telling them another story that is better.

Then you have to deal with the "big truck" ending. The student doesn't know what to do with a character so somebody comes along with a gun and blows them away or they step off a curb and get hit with a Mac truck. That has all kinds of variations that we deal with in class. I remind them that they are old devices--the "big homosexual story" or the "big sleep and then I woke up story". When you point these out, they never do it again.

LF: How do you deal with plagiarism?

AVH: The only thing they can plagiarize that's worth plagiarizing is a real story and I have read everything. I've never had that problem.

LF: It's a big problem sometimes for teachers; how would you deal with it if it did occur?

AVH: There is no way around it except to reward them for what they do themselves. The other thing is that your teachers have to be more aware of what is out there. I can't teach The Great Gatsby and be aware that essays coming across my desk are plagiarized unless I have read all the criticism on The Great Gatsby.

LF: It's impossible to read everything, all criticism on all works.

AVH: Yes, but the obscure stuff that kid won't find either. If they are imaginative enough to find something that obscure, they are probably smart enough to write a good essay anyway. If you miss it, it's okay.

LF: Do you talk about publishing in class?

AVH: One of the rules I have is not to utter the word publish; do not whisper it either. They ask why they can't talk about publishing. I tell them that when they are ready to talk about publishing, go to a publisher.

LF: Do you encourage individual students to submit certain pieces of their writing for publication?

AVH: Oh sure, but that usually doesn't happen until they are well into the second- or third-year courses and then it is in private conversation. They have sent stories to The New Yorker and they are hurt when they get a rejection letter. I laugh and ask them if they read The New Yorker. The answer is always no.

I have one class a year where they can ask publishing-related questions like manuscript format and simple things like that. It is up to them to make themselves professional. I say, "Don't ever send a manuscript to a magazine that you don't read, or you haven't read, because you don't know what they want. You go and read periodicals, to find out about publishing stories."

LF: Do you use textbooks or handbooks?

AVH: Anthologies of short stories, huge ones, and a Canadian anthology that has stories about Alberta and Calgary in it like West of Fiction.

LF: To what extent do you think the fact that you are a publishing writer influences your teaching?

AVH: Although I have approached teaching by saying it is like a performance, an improvisation, a telling of stories, it is also a working by intuition all the time. You know tacitly when it is time to lay off and when it is time to push. You are working by instinct on the basis of the stories you have in your hands as though they were your own. If you are not a teacher who writes, then I don't think you know when to let things alone and when to push because you yourself have not the experience that the student is undergoing. You can encourage the students to write without writing experience, but at the stage where they are beyond beginners, they need to be working with a master of the craft. I am arrogant enough to think that you also really have to have a teacher who wants to translate their experience and creativity into something accessible for someone else. But some people make terrible creative writing teachers, even though they are great writers.

LF: Is that why you teach then, to share your body of understanding about writing stories?

AVH: Yes and I am so good at it. If I were bad at teaching, I would get little pleasure out of it.

LF: What makes you a good teacher?

AVH: If you have invested an enormous amount in writing, then you do know that knowledge and instinct to convey. But you must also want to convey it to others. You have to be a kind of extrovert, not an extremely private writer. In teaching you go far beyond isolation. I reveal an enormous amount about myself to my students. What makes a good teacher is when you show them that you are willing to invest in them as much, if not more than what they are investing, in their writing. I never think of it as investing in students, so much as investing in writing. The world of writing is for me something that I really care about and want to do.

LF: You want new stories to read?

AVH: Yes, I want new stories to read. Creative writing teachers have said to me, "Look out, Sarah Jane is writing stories that are just as good as yours." I say, "Wonderful, more good stories." There is no competitiveness about it. I want more people to be creative writers. I think we live in a world where creativity is not rewarded. Mostly every effort is made to destroy it. If once a year I can find 17 kids who want to push off in favour of the creativity of the creating word, I am going to give them everything I have from my shoes to my guts because I am contributing to far more than the gross national product. I am contributing to the whole identity of Canada. If I could give them enough confidence to get on their feet and passionately engage in it as much as they can, then good.

LF: You are talking about an essential attitude for writing teachers, are you not? An attitude of acceptance, in concert with a very disciplined guiding.

AVH: It is a double acceptance,too. Their acceptance of me as well. I get energy, life, youth--the give and take of those students! I can change my point of view because I say, "Show me" and they show me. That's the wonderful thing about teaching. Some of these kids are younger, some older, but most are around my age. That's when students seem to decide that they are really interested (between the ages of 24 and 35) and when they really begin to pursue writing. It's not a kid's game. I have had very few eighteen-year-olds. There are almost no young creative-writing professors in this country. One reason I have had a very exciting experience teaching is because of my youth and my energy and my sex, which have contributed to what I get back from my students. Many of my students are women, but it is usually the great male writers who teach creative writing in this country and who control the literary journals. They control the writers coming up, and some of them are terrible teachers.

LF: Do you also have a sense of obligation to teach?

AVH: There's got to be one or two people out there.

LF: Have you changed your own way of teaching in the last six or seven years?

AVH: I think I have gotten a little easier. I'm still pretty tough, but they know that I care about them passionately. I will spend hours on a story with them. I know an enormous amount about those kids. They have the idea that writing is going to be their whole life and so their whole life gets involved.

LF: Do you have a metaphor of yourself as a teacher?

AVH: As a Panzer tank. All kinds of sensitive little flowers, and I roll over them, but what comes up after, boy, are the strongest thistles you ever saw and they are going to survive.

LF: That's a very destructive metaphor, isn't it?

AVH: Of course it is.

LF: Do you like that?

AVH: Well, I don't know if I like it--

LF: You talk tough, but you don't act tough. Isn't the Panzer tank stuff bravado, rather than the way you actually are with students?

AVH: It is also very serious. They know I demand work. I demand involvement. I demand commitment. I demand energy.

LF: Is it because you give those freely in return?

AVH: Not because of what I give, but I demand that because those are the standards and I believe in tough standards. I had tough standards used on me and it worked. Do you want to write or dilly around for nine hundred years writing a poem about a violet? Do you want an end result or do you want to mewl and puke? I want my students to write and I am going to back them into a corner.

The function of a creative writing teacher is to try to bring out the best that the student is capable of. I'm not in it for me. It's a pain in the ass reading five stories a week. I'm in it for the energy, and I'm in it because it's a job and I need money, and I am in it because I love students. It is a wonderful, powerful, emotional experience in some ways. When a kid finally hands in a story about three Chinese women playing mahjong and it is brilliant, I am just blown away; I'm excited for weeks.

I do think there are students who do need to be more carefully encouraged and more carefully monitored, but I am not capabable of doing that.

LF: Why?

AVH: I don't know. I haven't got the patience for that. I'm sure Jane Rule would be very good at that because she is more sensitive to people in terms of what they are feeling, whereas I concentrate on the product. I have always done that in my life too.

LF: What advice would you give teachers of writing in a school system?

AVH: I would tell teachers to teach writing the way music and art is taught, as a separate option.

LF: Do you see a place for that in the public school system?

AVH: Yes, there is a place for music and so there is a place for creative writing.

LF: Making stories from grade one up?

AVH: Making stories is something that happens inevitably in elementary school and that is very easily incorporated. I think all creativity in children should be encouraged. The system needs to be more responsive to what the children show as their talent rather than our forcing the children to do what we think they should do. And have creative writing courses. Bring in a writer to the school. There is enough federal and provincial money. Bring in an expert writer and have the teacher working with the expert. Those things can work together in very positive ways.

The other thing that is absolutely essential is that we should be teaching those kids at least half Canadian content. They should be reading literature, and it should be done with pleasure. There's such great stuff. One of the things that is absolutely essential in my course is that I make them read. You can't write short stories in Canada if you haven't read Alice Munro. You can't work in a vacuum. You must know what has been written. You want to enter the world as a full-blown Faulkner, get published, get a thousand dollars a story, but you don't want to read Alice Munro? Give me a break.

LF: Is that what you advise to writing teachers as well?

AVH: Yes. Make them read. Make the students read. The more they read, the more they write. The more they write, the more they read. The two things go together. Story is a whole world you enter. You read other people's stories; you write your own.

LF: If you were going to prepare a writing teacher, what would you do?

AVH: The department of education over here at the university teaches the teaching of writing as a course. They have never consulted me. The person who is teaching it is not a writer, and they have never had a real life writer talking to those teachers. Teachers themselves should take courses in the area they are teaching. It is essential. There are writers in this country who are experts on this. I am more interested in teaching writers how to write, but they can conduct special writing classes for teachers of English. It is nonsense to sit down and write everything you feel. I believe writers should be teaching, but I also believe that if you had teachers who are really good readers and have had a couple of writing courses, they could be really good writing teachers.

LF: Is there anything else you want to say about teaching writing?

AVH: If you know how to write, how to speak, how to express yourself, you have more power in the world than if you don't. If I walk into a class of pre-med students who say they don't need English because they are going to be famous brain surgeons, I tell them I can give them the opposite end of power, the language of emotion. You can be a brain surgeon all you want, but someday you are going to have to tell someone they are going to die. If you don't have the language to do it, your skills are going to be nothing to you. Those are the two approaches to teaching English--you can teach them to gain power and to gain emotion. Then you show them good writing, good essays, and you have them practise by writing. The most important thing is to keep them interested, give them interesting assignments. Often I say, "Go to a play or a restaurant or a movie and come back and write a review," and they enjoy that immensely.

LF: Are you saying to engage them with the real world and reassure them that their writing and work doesn't fall on deaf ears?

AVH: That's right. You can teach them descriptive and evaluative and persuasive essays and everything as long as you make them understand that they have something to gain. The same is true of literature. You teach them to reason when you teach them to write. You teach them to use language as a tool, as a means to an end, as something that has a result.

LF: Do you think people learn to think better if they write better?

AVH: Yes.

LF: Creatively or functionally?

AVH: Both. Students who write well are quite capable of writing creative stories. But you can't play beforehand and then think you will get control. Just because language is in their heads and mouths, and they can read the newspaper, it doesn't mean they know English. My first essay assignment is always "If you could spend a day with a famous person, who would you choose?" Sometimes I get totally disheartened, but if I get an essay on Dostoyevsky or Einstein, I "freak out" with joy, because we really often deal with children who are almost sensorily deprived. I recommend that students take a composition course before taking a creative writing course.

We need full-year English courses. I love to teach full-year English courses because you need time to entertain and cajole and enrage and involve them emotionally in writing and literature.

Chapter Six - Jane Rule

In 1931, Jane Rule was born in Plainsfield, New Jersey. She grew up in the midwest and in California, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, from Mills College in 1952. Rule moved to Vancouver, British Columbia in 1956, where she lived for twenty years, writing and teaching creative writing groups. The last several years have been spent on Galiano Island, which has become her home, although trips to the United States and overseas are frequent. She is active in the Gulf Islands' community, contributes time and energy to various writers' and women's groups, reviews books, and writes articles, in addition to attending to her own work.

Rule occasionally grants public appearances (usually because of a sense of responsibility to the publisher in conjunction with release of a new book), and coordinates writing workshops, where she assists fledgling writers in discovering their own voices and encouraging them to say what they need to say. However, at this stage in her life she tries to keep private time, in which to write and live.

Written works include Rule's collections of essays and short stories: *Theme for Diverse Instruments* (1975, *Lesbian Images* (1975), *Outlander* (1981), *Inland Passages* (1985), and *A Hot-Eyed Moderate* (1986); her novels include: *Desert of the Heart* (1964), *This is Not for You* (1970), *Against the Season* (1971), *The Young in One Another's Arms* (1977), Contract with the World (1980), and Memory Board (1987).

Jane Rule Interview

By letter, Jane Rule agreed to be interviewed on Tuesday, April 30, 1987, in her home on Galiano Island, British Columbia. Ferry passage from the mainland and reservations with Penny's Cottages were confirmed for the Sunday, two days before. A note of welcome with Jane's telephone number and the suggestion of 9:30 a.m. as a starting time was handed me on arrival by the then proprietor, Bill Calloway.

That Tuesday was a coastal gray day, quiet and misty as my sister drove me and my tape recorders and Glenfiddich down the Rule side of Bluff Mountain. I unloaded a bicycle from the car to pedal home when I was finished.

Jane met me at the door of her home and invited me to come into the living room and prepare for the interview. There was some discussion about plug-ins and placement of the recorders. This was clearly a thing she had done before. She offered me mineral water and we began. I felt awkward at being a neophyte interviewer and shy at speaking with someone I did not know at all, except by reading her work and by reputation as a superb teacher. Through her low, confident, and gentle talking, though, it was very little time at all before we fell into comfortable discussion dealing with writing. We were interrupted only once when someone phoned about film business.

We finished the writing questions just past noon, and Jane invited me into the kitchen to talk while she prepared a delicious lunch of artichoke hearts, bread, and grapes. Helen, her companion, came home with mail and news of the local kind. Their conversation referred to people I did not know, but I was not excluded in the least. On the contrary, for the time I was there I felt rather connected to the people, to Jane and Helen, and to the Island as though I were part of it.

After lunch, about 1:30 p.m., we resettled into the living room and began to talk of teaching writing. There were frequent references to the individual voice of the writer, to the importance of simply writing, and to a positive, loving approach to teaching writing. By four o'clock we finished the questions, both of us spent and tired, but friendly.

I loaded my gear into, and onto, my back pack, climbed on my borrowed bicycle, turned and waved to the tall figure in the doorway, and pedalled away down the gravel island road excited about the quality of the information contained in the answers I received.

Jane Rule Writing Interview April 30, 1987

LF: Could you explain a little about when you started writing?

JR: I made up my mind when I was about 15 or 16 I was going to write. I was going to be a doctor before that. Then I became aware that medicine was about science rather than about people. I was a kid that needed direction. By the time I went to college when I was sixteen I was very clear in my head [that I was going to write].

LF: Did you make changes, adjustments to prepare for writing--for instance, taking writing courses?

JR: Well, I thought I have to be an English major but I was not a reader. I was a dyslexic kid so I had a fair amount of difficulty. It was extraordinary to be with people who were readers, who had read a lot of this stuff that we were referring to in class.

LF: Did somebody encourage you to write?

JR: No, quite the opposite. My parents were prepared to be indulgent in any thing that I thought I wanted to do. All through college where you have that split in the English department: there are the serious students (the scholars) and there are the creative writers. I was good at scholarship and was encouraged to go on to a Ph.D. The standard statement was "you could be a first-rate scholar, you might be a third-rate writer." That was a thing that baffled me: that people assumed you would choose to do what you were good at. I was very poor in testing in English. They did an aptitude test and I tested 86 on my IQ. You were not supposed to get into college with that kind of IQ. But, because they felt confident about my critical ability [they took me]. Of course my writing was all over the map as kids' writing is, so it was always "don't daydream; now you're growing up; pick something you can earn a living at." At this point I was in the States.

LF: When you wrote at the age of sixteen, what needs were met?

JR: I don't suppose any needs were met in those early days because I hadn't located at all what it was I had to say. In fact, in good measure, I was trying to obfuscate what it was that I had to say in college.

They teach you about metaphors and symbols. The need that was satisfied was learning to get hold of language, learning what it could do and what I could make it do. It was that kind of confidence--I started out very badly because I was left-handed and the last generation would make you right-handed. I couldn't read and I am an intolerable speller. With all of these things, I was being told to shut-up. My voice was as deep as it is now when I first spoke. So, for instance, in choirs I could carry a tune, I could sing harmony but I couldn't sing in the range that everybody else was so they didn't let me sing. I spent my childhood being shut-up in one way or another. So the sense of getting competent was urgent.

LF: You had a sense that the use of language was a powerful tool?

JR: [Affirmative] Hmm-mm.

LF: Has that changed?

JR: NO![Laughter]. One of the excitements about language is that it is complex enough to be challenging for a lifetime. There may be a lot of skills that you get to a certain place and there's no place else to go. Of course language isn't like that. It's rich enough and demanding enough, so that it goes on forever. You keep pushing.

LF: Are there parts of your formal education where you did get help with language and writing? Were there significant teachers?

JR: I had wonderful teachers in Mills where I went to college. One in particular was the head of the department who was really my private tutor all through college because it was a small place. Though there were very bright students, there were very few students who were really interested in writing. Any student who was identified as somebody who really cared was spoiled rotten. All the literature studies were helpful. But I don't think you're taught in literature classes the "nitty-gritty." Nobody is so mundane as to talk about how you get your characters talking, or how you stop them, or "meanwhile back at the ranch." All of those things that are so important particularly to a beginning writer are just not touched on anywhere. You just have to learn those for yourself, learning to be critically aware of how a thing's made.

LF: Is that the kind of thing you did when you really looked at the stories, to see how they were made?

JR: When I get stuck in technical things, that's what I do but then I had a whole range of reading. But you have to simply go to something and say "all right, I know this writer does this well; how is it done?"

LF: Did you take writing courses?

JR: Yes I did. I feel very strongly that they should be offered, not because because they teach very much but because they give a student permission to write. When you've got pressure from your 17th century course, from your Shakespeare course, and from your required history course, it would be very difficult for a student to go on with her own writing if there wasn't a course that you felt that you could get information from. At Mills, there was only one writing course and I took it three out of the four years.

LF: And that gave you some space for writing?

JR: That's right.

LF: How early do you think it would be useful to offer a student a creative writing course?

JR: I've taught in secondary schools twice, as low as eighth graders and I think writing is very important. I taught in a private school with 12, 13, 14 students. My students wrote once a week about anything they wanted to, and wrote other assignment things. An essay a week was absolutely required of every student in the school. If you have only got 13 or 14 students in your class you can do that. You say that to a public school teacher who may have forty in her class, and it may be one of five classes and that's where you get the dictum "You learn to write by reading." Teachers can't mark all those papers. Reading helps, but you don't learn to write by doing anything but writing.

LF: Is there informal education that contributed to the way you write now?

JR: Yes. When I was first in Vancouver there was a writing group who got together and read each other's work. I went to that for a while and very gratefully, because I met other writers. Phyllis Webb was in that group (that goes back 30 years) and wonderful connections were made. But they were a group of quite competent writers who were perfectly dreadful critics. I thought "this is not only not valuable, it's dangerous, not so much to me, but to some of the others who were less bullheaded and less committed than I."

LF: Was it like a sensitivity group where they tell you all the things are wrong and then let you go?

JR: That's right. Bill McConnell was a lawyer and I can remember him saying "You can't use 'penultimate' in a poem; that's a lawyer's word." I was in my early twenties and Bill was in his early forties I guess. I just thought this is stupid; it's just a waste of time. They are going to fight now about what words belong to me and what words belong to you. So I did try that sort of thing. I didn't find it a bit helpful, so I simply withdrew, except for the friends I made, a number of people who later on became writers.

LF: I wonder about that informal network. So it does have influence for you?

JR: Negative, except for friends.

LF: Have you changed your writing over the years?

JR: I didn't start writing non-fiction or essays until Doubleday commissioned Lesbian Images. I said, "I don't want to do it." I'm not a critic, and I know all kinds of books that shouldn't be written; I can point to a number of them. What kind of a book should be written I don't know. But that was on request and I still don't write non-fiction very often unless it's for a particular thing I've been asked to do.

LF: Were you asked to do The Hot-Eyed Moderate?

JR: That's a collection of essays about nine-tenths of which were asked for by The Body Politic who asked me to do a column. Branching Out asked me to do the essay that I did for that, and so almost all of those are command pieces, except for the ones at the end. The one on Auden, I wrote out of fury at the things that were being printed about him ten years after his death.

LF: Where they say he was a silly man?

JR: Yes, maybe he was a silly man, but he was also a great poet. I think it behooves us to remember that, and not to just take broadsides at him. Some of the profiles I did just because I wanted to do them. They're longer because I have my own format rather than having to conform, although I like the short essay format. It's fun; it's like sending a telegram. You figure out how much you can get in how little space. I found I really enjoyed it, but it's not a choice so much as simply a response to a public that wants it.

LF: Are you writing your own fiction now?

JR: Yes.

LF: Do you have a mentor or a reader now?

JR: While I work, Helen reads aloud to me what I have done but we never talk about it. I really need to be inside my own head when I'm working. When a thing is finished, I am perfectly glad to talk about it. But it helps if you have a good sight-reader. Most of your audience are going to read what you write just once. You want to be sure that there is surface clarity, that there is richness there if people want to go back to it, but you also want to make sure that the tone works. If I read it aloud, I know what the tones should be, and I can put it there. [If someone else reads it] I can hear that the tone hasn't been signalled early enough or strongly enough, or where there's a tonal shift. Helen will take a run at a sentence and have to do it again and nine times out of ten that's my error, not hers. I can tell that the grammar is perfectly acceptable but not functional.

LF: Have you done that a long time?

JR: For thirty years.

LF: That's also interesting in terms of teaching, of reading aloud students' work.

JR: I learned that [reading aloud] in the first creative writing course I took. The man who taught it was a brilliant reader and he read our manuscripts and while he was reading he gave everything he could to the work. He was otherwise a rotten critic--sarcastic, show-off, flippant--but when he was reading, none of that was operating. He was giving this piece of work everything there was to give it.

It's one of the places that I learned that if you get a good reader, you've got the criticism right there that you need. The rest of the course was ego games.

LF: You talk in the end of The Hot-Eyed Moderate about community and I wonder now how you've lived that out. What writing organizations do you belong to?

JR: The Writers Union is very important, and I think it is to most of us. There are a few members who are doing it to pay their dues and they're just not joiners. But because Canada sends its writers back and forth across the continent so much we've all gotten to know each other. Marian Engel spent two summers on this Island. Margaret Atwood and Graeme Gibson and Jess have rented a house here several times. We are friends as well as colleagues. One of my real communities is the writing community. Though I am far from it in a sense--Audrey Thomas lives up at the other end of the island and Dorothy Livesay lives here and Phyllis [Webb] is over on Salt Spring. We are also in touch because we also work on things together. Last year we were doing the first Marian Engel Award. It was Tiff Findley and Margaret Laurence and me. Right in the middle of that, Margaret found out she had terminal cancer. That isn't just losing a member of a committee. When Marian Engel died, for instance, Tiff [Timothy Findley] sent a telegram so that we wouldn't hear about it in public. Just the best kind of tenderness and thoughtfulness is very typical of how these people connect.

LF: In that way there is a great deal of nurturing?

JR: That's right; that's right. I have never been in any other country where that goes on; in the States it's so big, people are just totally isolated. They meet in their own little groups, but there's no sense of national connection. There is a little bit in the women's movement; even I feel connected with people down there. The other writing organizations I belong to like B.C. Writers Federation--all of that is to pay my dues. They aren't organizations that mean anything to me except that I'm a professional writer and I ought to support them.

LF: Do you have a sense of turning around and doing the supporting as well as being supported?

JR: Sure, sure. I was thinking about the periodicals. I think the one that's important to me is Women's Review of Books that comes out of Boston. When it first came out I sent off a subscription and got a letter from the editor saying, "Will you not just subscribe but write for us?" That's a really sweet thing to have happen and you know just exactly how short-staffed they are if the editor is checking the subscription lists. The same thing happened when I subscribed to Books in Canada and that was years and years ago when it first started. I got a letter right back saying, "Will you write for us?" and that's very welcoming. You can have a relationship with that paper or that organization that's very different from just being a reader.

LF: Let's talk a little bit about process of writing. I'm sure it's an old question: "Where do you get your ideas?"

JR: It's a hard one to deal with.

LF: Do you have a kind of pattern?

JR: I keep notebooks; most of the things that I write start with ideas. At this moment, I really want to write something about living alone. I want to write about characters who live alone and whether or not it is a state that is permanent or is in transition. When I was beginning Contract with the World I thought it was two novels. I wanted to write a novel about people all the same age, because it's a hideous trap in our culture. We're so conditioned to it by the time we've finished school we go on doing that. Of course the society also makes it almost necessary. People have children the same age as your children, have them play together. It goes on and on until we put everybody in an old folks' home. I also wanted to write about a bunch of people all of whom wanted to be artists. I was keeping notes on both those and suddenly realized that they were the same book. I start with a concern about a state or an experience. For example, I want to write about somebody who has trouble handling money. That's probably a short story. Sometimes you know that what you want to do has so many different ramifications that it's a novel.

LF: You start with a notebook; do you have a word processor or typewriter?

JR: I have a typewriter but I work in long hand now. I used to compose on the typewriter but I can't sit at my typewriter that long now. I write lying down at a lap board and then at the end of the day, transcribe onto the typewriter.

LF: Is this hard for you?

JR: No, because I get up and move around; it's this [back] and the tension. By nature I can sit for five hours without moving. The physiotherapist said you've chosen exactly what do to to wreck your back. At first I thought I'd have to just quit; but we're all married to our habits.

LF: You have done some adjusting?

JR: Hmm-mm. [Affirmative]

LF: I have a question about initial stage of pre-writing and whether that is different for fiction or non-fiction.

JR: Certainly fiction takes an awful lot longer for me, but with the essay stuff, I'm really writing because I know what I think. In fiction I'm writing to find out what I think. I don't find essay writing very often exploratory except in language. It is fun to play. I get an idea for an essay and sit down to write it. A short story can take anywhere from three weeks to five years. Same thing with a novel.

LF: Do you have a particular space to write in?

JR: My study. It's right downstairs. I'll show it to you later.

LF: Do you write daily?

JR: When I'm working on the novel I do.

LF: Do you find the transitions difficult between going away from here [Galiano] and coming back?

JR: Not if we're going away for long enough. If we go away for two weeks, it's useless. If I know that we're going to be someplace a month or two, I start writing right away. There really isn't any transition. If it's only two weeks, beforehand, I'm thinking it's not long enough to settle down which is stupid. When I get there and I know I'm going to be there, I can go right on working. I can remember one year how Helen very much wanted to get away from Vancouver, but I was in the middle of a novel. It was not really a time that I wanted to move. But, Helen really had to get out and I could write anywhere we were. I don't usually work more than three hours a day.

LF: You don't physically sit and write for more than three hours a day?

JR: That's right. If I have time, I put in another two hours in revision and puttering.

LF: Is there a lot of mental time you can do throughout the day, away from the study and the typewriter?

JR: Yes, and all the time. Helen says I'm a very polite presence. [Laughter]

LF: You need lots of privacy for writing?

JR: Well, I take it.

LF: Is that ever a problem?

JR: It's a problem. The older you get and the more well known you get, the more people want you to be a writer, rather than writing.

LF: For instance, I show up?

JR: Sure, and lots of it is interesting and lively, but I set aside this whole week for other people. Tomorrow I'm doing another long interview helping people with their book week, getting their Friends of the Library together. At the end of the week I'll be at Saltspring doing something else for the community, but that's it, thank you. I try to slot in a whole week where I'm doing nothing but that, so that I'm not trying to get back to work. You have to be terribly careful because the pressure from the public is just enormous. My American publisher is very angry with me because I've never done any publicity in the States. My British publisher is paying my way to England to help launch a book in the fall. I'm not going to turn that down because I want to go to England, but I hate publicity. I hate all the stuff that is involved with it and when I come back from England, I'll have to teach for a week in Montreal. Then I go to Toronto and do publicity for a week, so that takes out September and October. And of course when I was younger I had to teach. It's fortunate that I don't really like it most of the time, so that I don't get seduced into public performance. A lot of writers really like to leave the loneliness of the work. I never give readings. I rarely give lectures. I do go to teach because I like to find out what people are doing. That's not being a writer; that's being a teacher and I'm perfectly comfortable in that role.

LF: People around you understand?

JR: Yes. I am practically the only writer I know who doesn't have to leave home to work, and I never have had to. I don't need a retreat, that's what I live in.

LF: So the things that compete for your time are public things. Are most of the things like that pretty much in your control?

JR: They can be, absolutely. But the pressure is awkward when publishers say, "We really are not going to make this if you don't help us." My attitude is, "I write it; you sell it," but the whole system is set up to sell the writer by the pound. Publishers don't want to pay for this bloody publicity, of course. Canada Council does, so it's absolutely free for the publishers. Writers are not even getting substance pay while they're on the road, and they get exhausted and angry.

LF: And not writing.

JR: Yeah, and after a while, it gets into your writing. It's no wonder that a good deal of Peggy's [Margaret Atwood] work goes sardonic, because she really does work very hard out in public, not only for herself, but for all of us. I think to spend as much time as she does as a public person takes its toll.

LF: Is there a pressure that builds up if you don't write?

JR: Hmm-mm [affirmative]. I would say that that's a writer's question. I used to think also that guilt was a great help. I never feel as if a thing is ready to start writing; I always think it needs more work in the notebooks. That's the really hard place for me. I have to be arbitrary about it and finally say, "Whether it's ready or not, I'm going to begin." Over the years, I realize that that is the hedge place for me, the place of uncertainty. I did try to give up writing and it lasted for about six months. Then I thought I really don't care whether anybody reads this stuff or not; I just have to go on doing it For me, it's what I do.

LF: Making fresh sense?

JR: [Nods]. There's a quality of attention that I don't have anywhere else in my life. And if I don't have a certain amount of time with that focus, everything in my life seems out of kilter. The closest analogy I have to it--I spent some time in a nunnery with a friend of mine just a while ago. I thought this is very familiar to me; I don't believe any of this gobbledy-gook, but the prayer rhythm I felt very comfortable with. It's the focussed attention. This is the job that matters; this is the central metaphor of life--

LF: The most engaging thing?

JR: Hmm-mm. [Affirmative] I think people meditate because it is a human hunger to be focussed for part of any day.

LF: Without the world tearing at you...

JR: [Nods affirmatively]

LF: I wanted to ask you about your relationship with words?

JR: One of the things that interests me is a lot of writers I know are interested in words, and I'm not.

LF: You are interested in what they do?

JR: Yes. I enjoy being around people who are--Helen is fascinated with language and meanings. Somebody will say "I wonder where that expression came from?" and Helen will get out the O.E.D. [Oxford English Dictionary] and start discovering other things. It's almost always a kind of punning game play, where it's words rather than baseballs. I'm around it a lot but it wouldn't occur to me to do it myself. A lot of our friends are older and all are having trouble remembering names. I always say the first thing we do is give up proper nouns, and then common nouns. If you've lived with somebody forever and ever that's very easy. I can say to Helen, "Will you hand me the--" and she knows what I mean. It's absolutely so rare for me when I am writing that I have to search for a word. There are words that come into my vocabulary by way of a book or a friend, and so obviously a word will catch me like that. I sort of know what it means but not so that it's one of my words, and that's a range that I would like to hold--so I'll be self-conscious about it, but that might happen ten times a year. I know there are lots of writers for whom that investigation of vocabulary is very basic to the process of writing, and for me it really isn't.

LF: It's more the thinking process that goes on for you?

JR: Hmm-mm [affirmative] and the structure. I'm probably even more self-conscious than most writers I know about sentence structure; I mean prose writers, not poets. That can catch me when I'm reading: how the hell did he pull off that sentence, and really go back and look at it. I love grammar; it just absolutely delights me.

LF: Have you studied another language such as Latin?

JR: Latin and German, but they're gone.

LF: Are you ever afraid to write something?

JR: Yes, and that's an absolutely clear thing for me. An example I often use is a short story I wrote about a couple whose children had finally all left home and they were going to take a trip across the United States. They were feeling just "barky" when one their daughters came home to them, thinking that she would probably divorce her husband. They're just about to take off on this trip and here they are stuck with this kid again. So, she decides to go with them and while they're on the trip she discovers she's pregnant. This causes her mother to tell her that she had to marry her father. They're in sort of parallel circumstances and the relationship between the parents is a good one. One of my mother's friends came up to her and said, "I didn't know you and Art had to get married." There was nothing at all in the story that would identify my parents. My mother had the grace to think it was funny. She didn't have to marry my father and so she was home free. I tell that story because there is no way that people aren't going to impose autobiographically on reading some things. There isn't any defense against it.

LF: But you yourself are careful not to violate, for instance, the privacy you've set up here?

JR: That's right. Helen and I are perfectly public in our moving in together--I refer in writing to our relationship because that's all right with her. But I suspect that even in fiction there are times when I can think I won't use that kind of detail because of course your family and your friends read your work looking for themselves. My father says to me, "I can never be a good reader of your work, because I know I can recognize certain episodes or scenes. I know what's true, but I don't what isn't," which I thought was a very interesting way of putting it. In The Young in One Another's Arms I gave the Ruth character a childhood in a place where I spent summers, but that's all.

LF: It's a place you know?

JR: Yes, and my father said "I know you like your mother, but Ruth didn't like her mother." I said "So." He replied, "Well, she was at South Fork." This is a bewildering problem. I have a hunch it's why so many writers are estranged from their parents. A lot of writers, really because there's no protection, simply give up worrying about it or being concerned about it. I put a hell of a burden on the people near me and some of them can't take it. My younger sister, for instance, feels very betrayed and very frightened by the writing. There isn't anything I can do about it. My parents are so wonderfully clear about that. I can remember when I agreed to do Lesbian Images, I said to my parents, "People can, when they're nervous and concerned, read my writing and see that I deal with gay people, but they can always say it's fiction. Mystery writers don't necessarily murder. But, this book will blow that." Both my parents said, "That's our problem, that's not your problem. We'll deal with it."

LF: That's an amazing sense of love, and you don't want to be the source of hurt to those people.

JR: No, and my father is one of those people who really thinks once he has a kid, he has be able to climb up the tallest tree there is to get that kid down. He'll never lose that, it's just there.

LF: When you are confronting things that may ring in your mind, "Saying this is familiar" and "Perhaps I should alter some details, change something so that it isn't quite as recognizable," how do you write through that and keep your authenticity?

JR: It's a very negative way to write. When you're reaching for details to disguise something rather than to create, my sense is simply to put it aside. There's too much negative energy going into saying well, he was tall so let's make him short. I want somebody to be short because that's a necessity for the circumstances. If I find that what I'm doing is putting moustaches on posters, if I have to borrow too closely to life in the humankind of my story, I'm being lazy. I haven't really let this go through the entire creative process.

One final point about the biography thing--the reason that I chose fiction in the first place was that it was easier to tell the truth. When you're not worried about offending anyone, you can really say the hard things that need to be said. One of the reasons it took me so long to write an essay was that it felt to me a very constricting mode. With fiction, though my public may think that all of these things are real, the people close to me know they're not, so that I'm not in a difficulty as I'm writing. The ideas [in fiction] are an amalgam. For instance, you're going to write about somebody who has lost a parent. I haven't lost a parent; my knowledge of that comes from dozens of people and dozens of experiences of loss. I couldn't even trace back the genesis. This character is based on five different people; it's probably based on a hundred different people.

LF: But the central core to your writing is a human experience and the detail can be written at will.

JR: Hmm-mm. [Affirmative] One of the things that we need to explore and know about grieving is that there's an awful lot of anger. That's not something that is accepted in our culture, not something we give permission to do. One of the values in fiction is to be candid about human experiences, if our fiction writers are telling the truth.

LF: Is there any edge for you in writing? You mentioned the discovery thing earlier. Is there a line between ecstasy and terror in that discovery. Do you discover things you don't necessarily want to know or is there a continual sense of delight?

JR: Mainly there's delight. When I'm writing I already know most of what going to be there because I do a lot of pre-work. The main interest in writing is language. I can be amazed at how badly I can still write after all these years. You wouldn't think that you could serve the ball ten times and hit the net every time, but even that is a sort of amusement rather than frustration because I've been writing long enough to know that I'll get out of it. There are places that you get to, where you don't expect the psychological depth that you've struck. At the end of Against the Season an old woman who has been extraordinarily kind to everyone suddenly in her dying moments just lashes out, and I didn't expect that. It just happened and I don't necessarily trust the things that just happen. I don't have any deeper mystery about that stuff. But I sat with it for quite a while and I thought it just simply feels deeply right to me. I was in a group of people, who were discussing my work. A number of people were complaining about the scene saying, "It's absolutely out of character, and we don't see why it's there." There was a doctor in the room and she said, "It didn't bother me in the slightest; people don't like to die and they get very bad-tempered about it." I find it hard to put my characters through certain kinds of things the book requires. I don't like to kill my characters. I back away from that. I sometimes know that I put my characters in positions where the reader is going to judge the character and I don't like that. I have to be careful not to be defensive of them.

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I found out all kinds of things about that from the difference between writing *Contract with the World* and *The Young in One Another's Arms*. You never get inside any of those characters' heads. The only way you perceive them is through Ruth who is not the main character. Without my realizing what I was doing, I was setting characters who were going to be perceived by a loving eye. I wrote *Contract with the World* from inside the heads of each of those characters. My mother adores *The Young in One Another's Arms*; she hates every character in *Contract*: "They're all absolutely hateful people; I just loathe this book." There is no one directing the reader to care about these people. It was technically fascinating; the whole question of point of view is always great whether you're writing a story or a novel.

LF: Did you feel free enough not to have to protect those characters anymore?

JR: I don't think that I was aware of protecting them in The Young in One Another's Arms; it was an inadvertent by-product of a technical project. I learned that that's the kind of thing you can do, but I was concerned with pain in Contract. I wanted to say if you are choosing to be an artist and you're coming up to 30 these are the kinds of things you go through. It's awful; put a bunch of people together who are all the same age, suffering from the same kinds of problems, and they're not going to be very kind or very supportive to each other. I was investigating something that is very painful. There are times when I've thoroughly disliked my characters; I'm never not interested in them, and I never lose basic respect for them. When a character says, "I'm not violent," and then slugs somebody in the face, it's not a moment you like. It's a moment you may like because technically and emotionally it's hilarious. I don't think about that when I'm reading. I don't think, "Do I like this character or not?" It seems such a frivolous question. You choose so few of the people that you're involved with.

LF: Interesting, that reader's response of "I like these; I don't like these."

JR: Hmm-mm. [Affirmative] I know exactly what the Library Journal is going to say about this one, because Mother's holding her nose.

LF: Do you have audience in mind when you're writing?

JR: No, except with the essays, because it's a particular magazine. I know it's going to be women reading it or gay people reading it, so I do have a sense of reference points. I know what to explain and what doesn't need explaining, what kind of common connection. But, for instance, with Contract with the World, Leo Anton wanted me to do two things both of which just seemed to be bizarre. First, there should a gloss in the back for all the real artists I've mentioned because the readers didn't know them--Barbara Hatfield or Henry Moore--and the other was be sure to put in a map of Vancouver because readers wouldn't know what I meant when I referred to English Bay. The third thing was that there were "too many blondes in the books. This is the New York city audience." I said to him, "There have been a lot of people who have never been to New York." He wanted to know what that had to with anything. I said, "If you got a New York novel, you better say where Fifth Avenue is."

LF: How do you know when a piece of writing is done and you will let it go?

JR: It's not hard for me to let it go now. It was when I was a young writer. I'm the kind of worker that I have to have each part set before I can go on to the next. I can't go on to the next section of the book until I feel that the preceding one is really finished. That process is what takes the time. I do most of my rewriting on the way. My last rewrite is a tightening of the screws, where I will have left in an image that I like but is really ambiguous and I think, "All right, take it out, put it aside." Those revisions are pretty minor, but then of course, it goes to editing, and that's a very comforting thing. I've had awfully good luck (I've had only one bad editor). Some of them are really funny. I just got a note from my copy editor in England--questions like mayonnaise on fruit salad. Or, an old woman in my book is going shopping for clothes and she's heavy and she's so grateful for the styles--these outsized clothes that are really designed for skinny, but in fact she can wear them. The editor asked, "What does this mean?" I think, "Oh god, are they not doing that in England." It gives you a sense of a safety net that you're going to go through it one more time after your own revisions. And then it's never perfect. But I also am interested in going on. By the time you get to the editor, it's probably a year old or maybe older than that. By that time you are under way in something else. You want it to be as good as it can be, but the imagination has left it behind. The only book that was published right after it was written was Against the Season and I really felt it was too young to be out there in the world.

LF: Is that how you evaluate your writing, whether or not it has become seasoned?

JR: No, but I don't think that's my job. You know when people say, "Do you have a favourite book or best book you've done"--there are private things I feel about my work but they have nothing to do with any public kind of evaluation. That has no relevance to the reader at all. I am always irritated when critics say writers have no judgement about their own work. You like your work for very different reasons because you are doing it. Nobody else cares a damn when I learned to do transitions. It was an enormous relief to me to finally get on top of it. No one cares that in This is Not for You I set myself with a character who never used metaphors and wrote a book without a metaphor. I put this down on page 10 and then I locked for two days thinking, "now what?" I love images but I realized also that they were a kind of show-off. It might be interesting to know those things, but you would not like a book because it had no metaphors. You might not even notice them. A writer's evaluation of work comes from a different place and from different needs. I don't have a need to read that book. Something that is absolutely finished and polished, the reader might think was my best work, but probably was one that I would say is lazy; I didn't push myself hard enough. I want a book where I can feel that sometimes I'm way out in left field.

LF: Hovering on the edge? Is this thing going to work?

JR: That is part of the energy. The excitement is to be pushing yourself in insight, in craft.

LF: The feeling of four-wheel drift at a hundred miles an hour when you're writing is "ah, have I gone too far?" Do you ever throw writing away?

JR: Yes, but mainly if there is something in a piece that I like, I'll shove it in a purse. Sometimes when I'm looking around for things to do and that's close by, I can see what I can do with it.

LF: Are there social or political influences that affect the way you see the world?

JR: I grew up in the Second World War. We were on the West coast during the war. My father was in the navy, and the whole bay area was just one hospital after another. My very much younger sister was sick a good deal during the war and was in the navy hospitals. We would go there, where eighteen, nineteen, twenty-year-old kids without arms, without legs, blind, were in a Quonset hut.

LF: You were an adolescent at the time?

JR: Twelve or thirteen--I can relay a very vivid beginning on board ship going to England. I was nineteen and I thought, "The world is trying its best to kill me and I'm not going to go home. I'm going to go and study Shakespeare. I'm not going to live my life like this." But I felt so clearly that the world was trying to kill its young, and that it was totally crazy, with a rage at the sense of it. My brother was by that time old enough to be in the service and just went AWOL. Both of us had spent the last four years of our lives in a section of the bay area [in Vancouver] where all the plastic surgery cases and all the blind were sent. My brother and I both loved bowling and we were asked if we would take classes of blind soldiers and teach them to bowl because it's such a restrictive sport and the whole problem with being suddenly blinded is balance. I can remember my brother was awfully good with the guys who didn't want to do anything--black despair--and he never shoved them but he would sit and talk with them. I remember once it took us about three weeks to get a guy to try anything. When he finally threw the ball he got a strike. He didn't believe us so he crawled down on his hands and knees, down to the end of the alley to feel around. These were kids five years older than me. There was also the sense that your father is in constant danger and hadn't been home for years, and you're home, yet nothing is happening to you. This is the other thing; all of that violence, all of that drama. I felt as if the world was conspiring to blow itself up, and, particularly, was out to kill all its young. Out of that experience was a focussing--"If you're going to have a life, you better damn well take it in your own hands, and you better speak your mind." Another thing was that I spent some time in Europe and not very long after that the McCarthy era began in the States. I couldn't believe it, reading European papers. I thought, "This can't be going on; I don't know of anybody, in any of my experience in America who would be putting up with this." When I finally got home, I found, of course, everybody was. I deal with that a little bit in the essay on Jessamyn West in "The Fourth of July, 1954"--that sense that I really didn't want to be in the States; I didn't want anything to do with that kind of witch-hunt. I just needed to get out. Again, that sort of thing made you feel your life was on the line and people were out, if not to kill you, to deprive you of your livelihood, making it impossible for you to work, impossible for you to publish. A sense of surviving was to get out of the country; I don't think there is a Canadian alive who is more grateful than I am to be a Canadian. Those are the central, motivating experiences. When Vietnam war came along, we were very much involved with the draft dodgers. Again, the concern for the young is what really dropped out of the world. Whether they're draft dodgers or Ph.D's, there's no job to go to so they drive a bus instead. Simply hear their cry!

LF: And it still is the case.

JR: Yes. It's the condition of the world. People will say to me, "You write about dropouts" and I want to say, "You still think there's a world to drop out of; for a lot of people there isn't." This is a fantasy that if people get Ph.D.'s, they get jobs. Most of them now do not. That 15% of people unemployed are acutally people, real, live people. A lot of the energy today comes from being out of the social condition and out of the political condition. To affirm the value of human life you have to affirm against a lot of the social structure, against a lot of the political structure.

LF: For yourself as a writing human being, you still continue to think about particular ideas and work them through. And if some of them happen as short stories and other people want them that's fine, that's really not where your attention in the process is. There's still a great deal of pleasure and learning going on when you're writing.

JR: Yes, I say to people, if you want to write for the magazines and make money, everybody has to be under 30 and you must put a major appliance in each story. And I've done it.

LF: How long was it from the time you started writing in a serious disciplined way until you did get published?

JR: Fifteen years. Ten years after college, but I was really working hard in college. Truman Capote was a contemporary of mine. I can remember a beloved friend of mine in college wailing, "I'm 18 and I haven't done anything." When you find that you're past 30 and you're still in that circumstance it's less and less comfortable. That's why I was interested in writing Contract with the World because I do think that the culture is set up to kill its artists. I mean to kill the artist in you. Just by saying that now finally you're grown up, you've got bills to pay, you've got kids; get on with it. I think a great many people give up and often for very loving and responsible reasons.

LF: There's the image very often of the writer as lonely or separate from society. To what extent does a sense of alienation or pain or struggle influence your work.

JR: Well I'm angry.

LF: A sense of injustice?

JR: I will have my voice. You won't take it away from me. You know when they started banning all the books coming across the border, my books were part of the seizure in England, and I just wanted them to know that that's not good enough. We're going to fight and fight and fight and fight. And I think that is a creative kind of anger. It is the energy to say this is important to do and I will not be stopped. It's very important that the anger not be turned into the world.

I think I am tribal so I don't really have a sense of being alone. I used to think of people who suffered from real depression in the sense that life isn't worth living; if only they could know at those precise times how many people hold them in concern. The metaphor for me goes back to the 'mother house'. I was interested in the one section of the day where the nuns pray for people. I would say, "Don't pray for me." It's so business-like it's like laundry lists. I thought, "Good, now it's done, they're taken care of," but people out in Africa, in tight spots have that image of 'mother house'. It is for me a kind of psychological good whatever way you do it, that you're part of a tribe that cares and that requires your care.

I probably got it more strongly as sense of family when I was younger. We moved around all the time so I never had a sense of community. There wasn't one. I was a stranger in a new place every year or so. My father supported the family as a salesman and we travelled all over the country. There's a town in Nebraska--my grandmother lived there and we went back there, but it's not my home. My extended family is mainly military. They move all over the world. The army or the navy is a family too, bogus connections, and gives a sense of belonging. I feel much more connected now with other writers, with the women's movement, with the gay community.

LF: It has nothing to do with place per se?

JR: Nothing to do with place because I never learned that.

LF: It's a human thing?

JR: Yes. A lot of my closest connections are connections on paper. I may not see my closest friends for two or three years at a time, but we're in connection.

It isn't that I don't connect with the community. I mean this community is important to me. It's not mine, but I'm its. My whole experience is if you want home you have to make it.

LF: If one is loved or accepted in an unconditional way, do you think that creates a kind of psychological freedom to say things, that is necessary for creativity?

JR: I don't really think there is any such thing as unconditional love. But I think love un-worked at dies.

LF: Do you think a loving network is important for you?

JR: It's one of the chief things that we forget to do, but that's a kind of thing that a lot of people come to me about through my books. This community assumes that any of the old people who want to stay here and not go, should be able to do so. We don't have any organized Meals on Wheels or any of that. It's just that among us we figure it out. You just really have to do it because we're all really connected. We're all going to be there one day just as all the kids need taking care of. They've been given a sense that they're important. You know when somebody says to me in July, "Well surely you can leave the pool for one afternoon." I made a promise and this is a promise I made to the kids. They expect me to keep it. If I want them to grow up keeping their promises, the first way to do it, is to quite absent-mindedly expect them to be there. I can arrange occasionally to be away if there's somebody as responsible as I am and as capable as I am to look after them. But I don't want that to happen very often.

LF: What kind of autobiography do you include in your writing?

JR: It's a quite arbitrary thing I do with my characters. I don't think it has anything to do with anything except a quirk in me. I don't ever create a character without giving that character something of my own. It may be an old chair I like or a summer place. I don't know what it is for me, but it's a kind of edge I guess. But it has nothing to do with anything except a kind of subjective connection. That's the only kind of conscious autobiographical stuff I do.

LF: You share something at least.

JR: And it's a meaningful token of me. There isn't any character that I'm not willing to be part of.

LF: People ask if a thing happened. Do you think they're asking something else or why are they so concerned about this?

JR: It's a real confusion about what matters. A lot of people don't like to read fiction because it's 'not true', they'd rather read biography. Fiction is frivolous because it's just a story somebody's telling. But then if it's a story that begins to get to them, then they begin to care. People say to me, "Well, that's all right because this really happened." But if it's a made-up story people are afraid they're being tricked or manipulated. They don't really know what their relationship to fiction is and what the writer's relationship to fiction is. I think that the question really is, "May I accept this as part of real experience, learn from it, feel with it, or is it just a story and am I being tricked?"

LF: Yes, the mistrust of author as liar.

JR: Yes.

LF: Which may be fair.

JR: I think it's the wrong question to ask. I don't think people understand the nature of fiction when they ask that question. It doesn't really matter whether King Lear ever existed. That doesn't seem so much of a trouble because it is so far in the past and King Lear is real as King Lear. He's part of the cultural inheritance.

LF: He's been there long enough to be real.

JR: But particularly realistic fiction that is close to people's own lives, it's there that they really do assume it's real, and if you tell them it's not, then they feel tricked. You would think that university professors would be more sophisticated than that, would understand the nature of fiction.

LF: They're still interested to know if this happened to you.

JR: Well, they assume that it did. I can't tell you the number of people, professors, who've asked me to lecture on Yeats. I know ten poems of Yeats very well, but one of my characters is a Yeats scholar. Somebody came up to me and asked me to do a cartoon. I said I can't draw. "What do you mean you can't draw?" And these aren't ordinary readers. These are academics. We're all basically confused. You can hang me with my characters if you hang me with all of them.

LF: But don't pick and select.

JR: No, because that makes no sense at all. Probably the most autobiographical characters are the least recognizably so.

LF: Because they're the interior?

JR: Yes.

LF: Do you have a sense of a writing voice?

JR: As a social creature I'm anecdotal. And I'm not at all in fiction. I'm not a tale-teller. But I am when I write essays. My essays are anecdotal.

LF: So your non-fiction is a different kind of writing?

JR: I think it's closer to my social private voice, just in that way. When I'm talking I tell stories and someone will say, "Well, why don't you ever write any of this down?" I say, "This is the stuff I dine out on." It doesn't have anything to do with fiction. But occasionally I realize when I do an essay I use that method. It's natural to me to think of an example or something that actually happened.

LF: Do you look at the world in layers, do you see metaphor when you see the world?

JR: I think I'm much less conscious of that than I used to be. If you take a book like Desert of the Heart, it's very clear that it's symbolically structured. The metaphor is basic to the book. I realized in response to that book that 99% of readers have no idea what that's all about: I've come to think of it as a kind of overemphasis from academic training that feels heavy to me by now. That book feels to me-- it's a popular book and I'm fond of it-- but it seems to me more self-conscious in those ways than I have a taste for now. I much prefer an integration in a story line so that they're all functioning together. What I wanted to do was write in such a way that it would pull as much of what I meant into accessibility for everybody.

In my earlier days of writing, I seemed to have two kinds of voices, one very rich in imagery and allusive and the other a fairly direct narrative style and I couldn't get the two together. The direct narrative style had a kind of flow and power that I liked but was thin, and I liked the richness, but it was too allusive, and I had to get these things together. Desert was the attempt to do that. It carried a kind of moral baggage that should have been much more integrated into the book rather than left with (Dantesque) references and mirror images. People who teach--love that book because there's all this stuff which you can mark. You've got the desert and the gambling casino, well away you go. For instance, The Young in One Another's Arms is really an informed refusal of the view that the poem, the Yeats' poem, states. I don't know why Yeats runs through my work as much as it does. There's obviously something very central in my creative nervous system that put that in me at a very impressionable age. It's "the young in one another's arms, the birds in the trees, those dying generations."

LF: Those are images that have stuck with you.

JR: The title, The Young in One Another's Arms, calls that up. The most-loved character in the book is really Clara, Ruth's mother. She goes into the old people's home; they can't live without her. She can live without them, but they can't live without her. And they've got to get her back. There's a metaphorical range in that book but it doesn't matter whether you see it or not. In the Desert I think it does matter because a lot of the moral content is played out in the metaphor.

LF: So the metaphor becomes almost a kind of shorthand.

JR: And code.

LF: I wonder if as people, writers, go on over a period of time and play with metaphor and continually are saying "Well, life is like this and it's like this and it's like this." Do you write yourself through to the other side? It's almost like people spend their whole lives questing after the perfect metaphor. It's silly.

JR: I was talking the other night, between here and Vancouver. Somebody had said, "I want you to talk about the writer as optimist." I said, "The first thing I want to say about that is that nobody has ever turned dross into gold. So if you want the artist as optimist it's an image of failure." My listener didn't like that at all. He liked the idea that we really did turn dross into gold. And I said, "No, what you do is illuminate the real." That's the most exciting idea for me that the facts are so rich and luminous that they have a metaphorical quality about them.

LF: People have talked about writing as a way of externalizing to make better sense or as a way of solving problems. What do you have to say about that?

JR: If you can't solve it, don't call it a problem, live with it. I think identifying the difficulty, describing it, is far more what art is about than it is offering solutions of one sort. I'd far rather have a reader be feeling "Yes I've been there" than "How do I get out of this?" Most real and important things haven't solutions and so they shouldn't be presented as problems. Yet that is what we do.

LF: What are the functions and responsibilities of the writer that you see?

JR: I think not any different from anybody else's. A writer's works' central value has to be aesthetic. I have no quarrel with writing for a political motive or a social motive. That was one of Dickens' intentions and I don't have any quarrel with it. But that isn't why he's valued. He's valued because he created wonderful characters. We reread Bleak House a couple of years ago and I really couldn't see the world in any other way. About every third day we'd say, "There's somebody else up against this: I'm waiting for my kingdom and in the meantime I'm not taking care of my life." It was such a wonderfully-realized experience that never mind that he wanted to reform Chancery. But a lot of political writing dies when the particular local issue dies. Dante was a political writer, and put all those guys in hell. That isn't why he's read. As human beings we all share social responsibilities. There's a real danger, for someone like me, for instance; the women's movement, even more than the gay movement, feels that its writers should be its leaders. Nobody who's writing novels ever stood for election. For instance, writers, Philip Roth and all these guys, make all the worst images of Jews. That community knows perfectly well how dangerous its writers are.

Norman Mailer did run for mayor, but nobody elected him. He lost the election and New York is the better for it. One person said to me, "Women clearly don't have a voice and when a woman does have a voice and it's heard, then she should be the person to tell other people how to live." A movement gets the writers it deserves.

I had a letter the other day saying that I had made a rude reference to a fat person in one of my stories and I was being called to task. This is somebody who doesn't read books but uses them as fun house mirrors. You get examples of them all the time.

LF: Do you want to say anything else about writing or writers?

JR: Oh, I think that's a good covering, excellent questions.

Jane Rule Teaching Interview, April 28, 1987

LF: What kind of teaching experience do you have?

JR: I've taught right from the eighth grade through graduate students and composition, creative writing, teaching teachers to teach writing at the university. I also did freshman English which was a lot of composition.

LF: Have you got an optimum number of students that you like to have in your class?

JR: Ten, ideally, if you're going to be teaching writing; particularly if ~~you're~~ going to be doing creative writing you really need to limit it.

LF: Do you have a sense of great difference between compulsory courses like composition and creative writing?

JR: Yes, and I prefer the compulsory ones. I know more what I'm doing when I'm teaching a compulsory course, for instance, for teachers who've got to teach writing. I don't know what to do in a classroom if I meet no resistance.

LF: You have a structure in mind with the compulsory things, go after it, and see what challenges come up?

JR: Yes. The format that students expect to take in writing courses is one that you have to destroy before you can begin to work because what happens is the student as critic is given absolute freedom. If you're dealing with a workshop, the student whose work is being considered is expected to sit and take a lot of critical comment that is mis-aimed self-indulgent, and ignorant. You immediately have to wreck that; say, "There is no way you can make any critical comment about a piece of work until you understand it, and you may not be able to then. The only useful thing you can do therefore is to be a reader and let the writer know what you heard. The first thing I want you to do after you've heard a piece of work is to characterize it as if to somebody who wasn't here." The first thing that we do is reconstruct the story, literally telling it again. The writer can hear a lot from that. Only after we've done that, after we've asked questions about why do you suppose this particular thing is here? How is it serving the story? And discussed it analytically, only then are there any critical comments. And mostly, if I hear them coming, I simply say, "This is enough, this is all we have to do."

What I want is for the writer to hear what the readers have heard. If there is something that the writer thinks is very important that no one has picked up, then, what I do is have a conference with the student and talk about the discussion and talk about what was disappointing. "Is that poor readership or is there something that the story needs to be doing better than it's doing?" I don't find very many students with the skill to be critics and yet they're set up to be and allowed to be and they get very miffed until they've had their turn.

LF: To show off their perspicacity to somebody?

JR: Yes. I remember one workshop--the first story we dealt with was a suicide and the first comment was "This is a bad story because the main character doesn't change and grow." I said, "Where the hell did you get that?" But that's the level of criticism in most writing courses and it's not only not helpful, it's destructive. When everyone is taking every detail of the story seriously, it can really pull up the socks of a young writer who hasn't paid that careful attention themselves. It makes a writer take him or herself more seriously. That's the basic teaching device that I do that blows peoples' minds. In the first place, they realize they don't listen very well. If I've got a very shy group, I will do it. When I do these "one-shots", I don't see any of the manuscripts ahead of time. I simply sit and listen, and then I describe the story.

LF: Do you have them read their own work?

JR: Yes, because I'm not a good enough reader. I wish I were. I think that would be a real help.

LF: While they read it, you listen, and then you describe back to them what you heard. Do you ask other students to do that?

JR: I say, "You've learned a lot of critical jargon. But most of you don't have the experience to apply it. And what you're doing is taking a subjective reaction and giving it a critical name when you really mean 'I don't like this character because he reminds me of my brother'. You've got all sorts of pejorative, judgmental, kneejerk reactions that are not at all helpful. I want you to listen to the story and receive it and then give it back."

LF: Do you ever have people write in the classroom?

JR: No. My own sense of discomfort as a kid trying to write in a classroom prejudiced me against that. But there are people who would rather be in a room with other people and have a time limit. It gives them a sense of discipline to get it done. In school I had to pay attention to that. What I used to do was to try to give options, so that a student was choosing to do the work in whatever circumstance was most comfortable. You can do this now or you can do it at home tonight.

LF: Is privacy a problem in any way?

JR: It has come up. I did a writing course here on the island because a number of young women wanted me to and they were very edgy about...

LF: Confidentiality.

JR: Yes. So we just talked about it. I don't think it was a perfect solution. There was a limit for some of them by the very circumstance. It would be like being a therapist on the island. Group therapy is absolutely useless in a place like this because people are just too close. They know too many extensions of each others' lives.

LF: Do you talk about creativity, about "being inspired" in the class, getting ideas?

JR: I talk about where you find your material. 'Inspiration' and 'creativity' are words that I am very angry with. I'm sick to death of being called gifted. I work very hard to do what I do, being a left-handed, dyslexic kid who couldn't spell and turning myself into a novelist. Art is hard work, and to disabuse people of the fact that you have to be gifted in order to do it really takes the language away from them.

LF: When I ask about creativity I'm wondering if you disabuse them of those kinds of myths?

JR: Yes, and talk to them about the educational system they've grown up in which has on all kinds of levels taken their language from them. You'll get college students who have not written in their own voices since they were perhaps ten-years-old when they learned to look things up in the dictionary and the encyclopedia and just rephrase it slightly. That's how they got their grown-up language. If you tell them to write in their own voices they sound like ten-year-olds and they're terribly embarrassed about it. You have to say to them, "If you're going to find your own voice, you have to go back there. It doesn't take very long to get up to where you are now, but that's an arrested skill. You've got to allow yourself to be ten-years-old in your language and grow up in it. Within a year you will if you keep at it."

"Not only has the language been taken away from you by these phony research projects that are just mouthing the language and sentence structure of grown-ups, but you've also been told that you'll be socially judged by all your errors." A kid who comes into school and says, "I ain't got no lunch," is going to be told by his English teacher that that's a double negative and therefore he does have lunch and that's how deaf that teaching has been. I have a series of grammatical errors that start from ones that anybody in that room who's gotten that far can recognize as errors--they may not be able grammatically to tell me why, they may not be able to say 'I ain't got no lunch' is a double negative, but they'll know it's wrong--down to errors that I wager that somebody who knows it's an error, either has a mother who is an English teacher or they went to private school. In no case is the meaning unclear. It's all the social ladder that you're climbing up. I always fortunately find somebody in the class who's been able to pick up the last error and when I say, "Did you go to private school or was your mother an English teacher?" some of them said, "Both." We do a lot of talking about teaching people whose home language is not socially acceptable and how much time is spent in school making people ashamed of how they speak and telling them to be careful and learn these new forms and therefore disenfranchising them in any kind of confidence, and how much responsibility we feel to those kids to make it possible for them to write a good letter to get a job, to make a good impression when they're being interviewed and that sort of stuff, and how costly is that in terms of shutting them up. These are real problems. I am sure most people don't write their Members of Parliament not because they're not interested, but because they're afraid they'll misspell the words. You're disenfranchised as a citizen by the way we teach English.

This is the way I work with the people who are going to teach people--to show them what's happened to them and why it's happened, and then to start getting them to locate really what they want to say, because most people who are not used to writing have no idea that they do have anything to say. I never give a subject assignment, but I give assignments that show craft. Most of the marking you get in papers is not to help you to write, it's to justify the teacher's mark. If you get less than an A, you have to have a certain number of red marks to show why you got less than an A. When somebody puts "vague" by a sentence, it's absolutely no use to you.

I'll turn them loose and say, "Write me ten sentences whose strategy is surprise, in which you come up against something that you didn't expect." I try to teach them those tools of charm that are so important in engaging people's interest. Gradually when they're doing those exercises, they begin to locate the things they're interested in. They begin to find what they have to say by simply having to choose at random without worrying about it.

LF: And then they begin to care about the form after that.

JR: Yes. With those students I do a lot of exercise work. I do all sorts of cornball exercises. I talk about the five senses and what function they have. Smell is the reminiscence, the recall of memory, so I put out everything from Dettol to perfume and say, "Take a whiff of these and pick a memory that comes up." I got a twenty-page essay on the smell of vanilla that came out of the psalms and the kid's father drinking vanilla when the sugar refinery wasn't functioning. The smell of vanilla meant to the kids on the other side of the track chocolate sodas. When they begin to find out they had this access to themselves, it just happens.

I do a lot of things to prime the pump of their imaginations without talking about it as mysterious. Toward the end of the year they begin to write more identifiable papers, personal essays.

LF: If they can find that voice, then you're past where you were as a kid in terms of being shut up.

JR: That's right. It takes months with those people to open up. I feel a little guilty at the end because I have twelve students going off thinking they're all writers. The world will disabuse them of that. But they feel good about what they're doing.

LF: But at least they have the confidence to say what they need to say.

JR: Yes, and then when they go out into the schools, they are not going to be part of the system that shuts kids up. I talk to them about devices. This business of making kids their own dictionaries is wonderful. When a little kid is writing and wants to know how to spell a word, you say, "Bring up your dictionary, it's your own notebook." The teacher writes the word out and a definition for them. At the end of term, you see what different vocabularies each one of those children has, and how much darker the vocabularies are than anything they're getting in their reading. They need more words for hate and fear and that sort of range than they're given. It's "Come up here and I'll give it to you. Now that's your word."

LF: So they build up their own vocabulary.

JR: And it belongs to them. There is nothing wrong in teaching a child to spell--but you don't do it at the same time you're getting a child to say what he needs to say. I tell this story over and over again because it so horrifies me: Helen and I were down visiting my parents when my nieces were little and they were in the pool. The middle one was five and Helen had gone down to be with her at the pool. I was walking down with a friend of my mother's who'd joined us. This child bolted up out of the pool soaking wet, came pelting down the path and said, "That lady, your friend, teached me how to swim and I'll never forget." I said, "Her name is Helen;" my mother's friend said, "Taught." If someone who feels as strongly as I do about listening and hearing what's said--this is a miracle this child is sharing. Something just wonderful has happened. I want her to know that Helen's name is Helen, that's what I'm paying attention to. And "That lady, your friend" is such an elegant phrase.

LF: In fact, the grammar that children make up is quite sensible. 'Teached' is past tense.

JR: Yes, a child by the time it's six knows the grammar of its language. All you're doing is teaching them irregular verbs that are common. I say, don't do that. Remember that we all do it. We have to be very watchful not to because that's the way we were trained.

LF: Do you have people talk about what they're going to write, the brainstorming?

JR: Occasionally, but my sense is that most people wear out energy in that. I have done splitting people up into groups. I'll give them a series of questions to deal with a particular play, then let them present it to the class. I do that more in training them as critics than I do as writers. I have a terrible feeling a lot of writing doesn't get done because people have already shared it and the energy's gone. The greatest energy for writing something is wanting either to shape it clearly for yourself or to share it, and if you've already done that...

LF: It takes away the need.

JR: Yes, and that need is part of the energy.

LF: If they're talking it may be that their own voice is again modified by the public forum.

JR: And of course, there are forms, like film, where it is a group activity, but if it's writing by committee that's what it looks like--it's like the Canadian flag, who needs it?

LF: You give particular assignments and have some inherent structure and yet a great deal of freedom. What about when you were teaching, did you have rules around the assignments?

JR: In as far as is possible, no. I hate giving length assignments because it simply invites people to use up space instead of use space. If there's somebody who can say it in a paragraph, that's what they should be doing. If somebody routinely shortchanges, then I think you work with the student. To say "write ten pages on" always used to irritate me as a student, and I was verbose. My problem was always I wanted more pages than I was allowed. I can remember a high school English teacher giving us as a topic: "I am a part of all that I have met." Forty pages later, I thought, "I can't do this."

But that's far better than an assignment I ran across from a student of mine. He had to write a paragraph entitled "A Derelict Factory by Moonlight." I got an image of this tired English teacher driving home from a late-night meeting and seeing this and feeling a little bit poetically touched and dumping it on his poor students. I've never forgotten that.

LF: How much are you involved during a student's writing, the actual writing? When people bring work to you?

JR: People send me stuff. I'm dealing with strangers who send me manuscripts that they want help on. I'm dealing with the Canada Council wanting me to evaluate stuff for publishing grants. I'm involved with people who want letters of recommendation for the Canada Council who send me their manuscripts. You do what you can. You do have to say "I can't edit your manuscript, it's not my job." Margaret Laurence told a wonderful story. This woman telephoned her and told her that she'd written about four hundred stories and none of them had ever sold, but she thought with Margaret's knack.... Margaret said, "I refused to see them, and I felt guilty about it ever since." And that was typical of Margaret.

LF: I had no idea such a barrage of public--

JR: I didn't either when I started into this racket, but it certainly is enormous.

LF: When you have a workshop where you're teaching, what sort of help do you find yourself giving beyond a reading?

JR: There are probably three or four useful new things that any young writer can learn, and I try to watch each student and see when that student is ready for a feed-in that will slightly change her hold on the club. It will make her strokes more awkward to begin with, but she's ready to try it. I watch somebody who may be ready to learn something more about dialogue. And it's usually very technical stuff, but if you can give them technical advice that you think they're ready to take, the students are growing. They're growing anyway because they're writing. Mainly you create a climate that gives them permission to write. Some students are ready for a lot of rewriting and others aren't. Somebody will say, "Do I have to rewrite this?" I say, "If you've learned it, if you've learned what the problem is, and you would have more energy to apply that to something new, go on to the next thing. You don't have to stop and fix it. But don't have a horror of it." The worst part of it is being made to do it. Lots of young writers can understand in general why something didn't work, but they don't honestly have the skill to go back and make it work. They often learn enough so they don't make the same mistake again or they have more command of the attack in the next thing they try. Some students are ready and eager for rewrites; some students you can't get off one thing. I was talking to a woman who has been rewriting a novel for five years and I think that's too much.

I do a lot of confidence work with the students because I don't see any other way to do it. I do a lot of listening when they want to come in and say, "These are the kinds of problems I have." And students locate their own difficulties without prodding.

LF: If you let them be.

JR: Yes, if they don't feel as if that's giving away their hand. In the writing courses fortunately you don't have to grade until the end of the year. Then you can sit down and talk with a student and normally negotiate a grade that you both think is fair. There's not that at the beginning, so you can create an atmosphere where a student can come in. Helen was the only person on a faculty that young teachers went to when they had problems because she gave them the sense that she was there to help them teach better not to find out what goofs they were making. Whether it's young teachers or your students, give them the sense that you're there to do whatever you can to help them do it better. If I have a student who's not working, I say, "You're making very good use of this year, you're finding out you're not a writer, that you don't have that motivation or that self-discipline." I've seen other creative writing teachers put up bait to get the students working. I think that's criminal. The one thing you have to find out is, whether or not you are willing and have that kind of temperament, to work when nobody gives a damn, which is what you're doing for the rest of your life. If you're finding it hard even to meet deadlines when there are people who are interested in what you're doing, you have no business to even dream of going on. Any other job people expect you to show up, but if you don't they know it. To this day, nobody gives a damn what I'm doing.

LF: If you don't get up and write, tough.

JR: Yes. Until it's done, nobody cares a hoot. When you're teaching creative writing at a serious level, where kids really are saying this is what I want to be, then I think one of the jobs is to say that's the one thing you've got to have. You may have all kinds of skills, you may have all kinds of good ideas, but if you don't have that, you're a washout.

LF: The trick is to let them be audience for themselves, encourage people to write when there's nobody to write to.

JR: Yes, often when I'm doing these workshops, I'm seeing people who can't write by themselves, who've gone to workshop after workshop after workshop. If I don't set them some sort of limit or idea to have them work with, give them a choice maybe, I get a short story that they're proudest of, that's been workshopped before. I understand that instinct. They think there's a visiting writer coming and they want to show themselves at their best. But it's pointless.

LF: Can you sense whether somebody's authentically struggling with something or whether it's some sort of canned piece?

JR: Well, it may be a perfectly good piece, but it's been workshopped to death. They're not getting anything out of it.

LF: Do you use silence at all? Space?

JR: I certainly do, and did when I was teaching a whole year, but the kind of teaching I do now is very intense. We are all very present and we are all exhausted. I teach three to four hours at a stretch, every night for a week. That's the only way that short term works. You have to keep it just so taut that you get to a different level of tension. They come away having worked in a way they haven't before. I think you can teach them a kind of intent that can carry on if they want to take it home with them.

LF: Are there things you learn in those encounters?

JR: I learn every time I try to describe something to somebody else, every time I look at a piece of work that poses interesting problems, the very act of trying to articulate what's going on is an act of learning.

LF: A good experience for you?

JR: Oh, yes, very good.

LF: That attitude of being co-learner, co-reader is interesting. Do you have that because people did that with you?

JR: I was restless from the time I went into college teaching. A lot of it seemed to me 'show-off'; "I will now show you what a brilliant interpreter of D. H. Lawrence I am." I don't think that's necessarily very useful to students. In literature I began to develop more and more ways to get them to be the interpreters. To raise questions for them, but to get them to be involved until I really thought the main part of teaching is listening. That's very difficult at a university level, if you're doing a lecture course for two hundred students. I did things to get people involved in doing it themselves. Students are restless with discussion because they want to hear it from the horse's mouth. "Who cares about what somebody down the way is saying, he's just a stupid freshman. I want to know what the real answer is." To get away from that you have to make the students work a lot harder, because that student's complaint is a genuine one. If you're going to do it differently you really have to show them what participation and preparation means.

LF: Model the behaviour first, show them this is how it's to be done, here's a way of doing it?

JR: Yes.

LF: When a student has a first draft, then what? Is that mostly the state you get things at?

JR: Yes. Well, no, the stuff I get in the mail is all hopefully finished and I honestly don't work with it. I will if I get a Canada Council request to recommend for publication. I had, the other day, a collection of short stories, the first two of which were simply appallingly bad, and the others quite interesting. I said, "I really am sorry about this collection, that there were twenty-some stories, and it would put its two left feet forward first. I think this book should be published."

In short writing classes, I don't know what kinds of revision they did. I come and go. In a longer class, I will look for the student who wants to do more work. I will go word by word in an editing job if they want it. But I never impose it on them.

LF: So it's always a question?

JR: It's surprising how many students ask for it when they'd object to it if you imposed it on them. It becomes special attention instead of punitive.

If it's your genuine attitude, then ways to manifest it occur to you quite simply. If it's a fake attitude, no matter how many devices you've got, you're going to be sending other messages to the students.

LF: The bulk of your class then is the reading of the student's text aloud by the student, then you and other students dealing with each of the pieces read.

JR: Yes, in this descriptive rather than critical way. Ideally, if you were an excellent reader you should do the reading because that gives the writer another dimension.

LF: Do you talk about audience?

JR: If they want to. I'm not interested in it and I tell them that. If somebody asks me what my audience is, I say, "Myself five years hence." If I'm goofing off a bit, I don't want to come across that five years hence. That's my alter ego sense. I say, "Do you want to know how to write for Redbook? Well, under 30 and a major appliance. Any other questions?" I don't take it seriously. "If publishing is what you want to learn about, this isn't the place for you to be."

LF: You're interested in the process of the writing?

JR: That's right. I've never been interested in publishing except as a way that allows me to be able to do what I want to do. That's how I function, so I know nothing about publishing and I try to ignore it because it would just get in my way. If a publisher says to me, "If only you'd done this in blue instead of green, then we could sell it." Fine, I'll get me another publisher or put it away. I've had my use of it. If it has other uses for other people, that's wonderful; that's a bonus. But it's not essential to what I'm doing. I think it is to some writers. But it's nothing I can teach because it's against the way I work.

LF: Do you keep your writing and teaching fairly separate?

JR: Umhm [affirmative].

LF: You don't deal with your own work in a class?

JR: Never. I've seen too many people on ego trips. It's such a no no for me that I really go to extremes. I just never mention my work. It used to amaze me how few of my students ever read my work. That's fine and I think it is admirable. I had a course from Jessamyn West, absolutely delightful woman. She brought in her galleys from her Redbook stories and her New Yorker stories and told us about the first poem she'd ever sold and just entertained us.

LF: And then it's a literature course.

JR: Not even that. It's a course in Jessamyn West, the person. She was charming and I liked her very much, but I thought, learn from this. We had fun.

LF: You don't learn a great deal about your own writing.

JR: No. You don't want to turn out writers who are addressing themselves to difficulties in imitation of you. And I get nervous about Rudy Wiebe and his students, frankly. You know, I think he does a lot of imposing of his own vision on his students. He's a very difficult character, but I'm very fond of him.

LF: Yes.

JR: I had a terrible row with him when he told us we were not going to smoke and drink.

LF: At Strawberry Creek?

JR: Yeah, I said, "Rudy, I wouldn't be alive today if I ever put up with anybody imposing their morality on me. I'm perfectly willing not to smoke in the meeting room and trouble people, but I'm too old and arthritic to stand out in the porch. If you will find a comfortable, warm, pleasant place for those of us who smoke, there we will smoke. As for drinking, I drink what, when, and where I please, and it's none of your business. You don't have to provide it." Poor old Pierre Berton came up to me and said, "I talked with Bob Kroetsch and he said, 'It's for real. We can't.'" I said "Pierre! Never mind, it's all taken care of. I've spoken to Rudy." Then we got there at night, and of course all the liquor stores were closed and there's no liquor store within twenty miles, so we're stuck. Pierre was just so disgruntled. Everyone was eating chocolate cake and drinking coffee at midnight. I said, "Well never mind, Pierre, I'll get you a drink." He said "How?" "Well," I said, "From this pint in my purse." He said, "Where will we go?" And I said, "Right here."

And I poured him a drink and he sat hiding it. It was just bizarre.

But I do think that sense of imposing vision is very dangerous in a teacher.

LF: How do you think you escape from that? Just because of the way your life goes?

JR: I think that you don't do as much directive teaching. There are kinds of teaching that you can do in writing that open up for each student. Nobody shares the same experience; nobody shares the same genetics. If you don't say what you have to say it's not going to get said. Because nobody else can do it.

LF: Which gets back to one of the reason why you cannot be, for instance, a spokesperson for all women.

JR: Yes. But I think a lot of people don't believe that. Rudy believes that there is a way that they know what they believe is right. That's why I said, "I wouldn't be here, I'd be dead, if I hadn't learned to say 'no' to this kind of thing."

LF: Revision, do you place a lot of emphasis on revision?

JR: If you invite them to have that experience with you, most of them want it. If you impose it on them, most of them hate it.

LF: So you leave the invitation?

JR: "If you would like me to be your editor," I will say to a student, "this seems to me close to being a genuine story. Do you want to polish it or want to go on to something else?" The student knows better than anybody else does whether or not that's going to be useful.

LF: That's a practical way to deal with that. "If you're not going to bother with this story why would I write pages and pages and pages of comments?"

JR: Exactly, exactly.

LF: Because it takes a great deal of work and concentration if you're going to do something like that to a story, even just to ask a set of questions about it.

JR: That's right. So don't do it unless somebody's going to use it. English teachers are pointing out the errors that irritate them and also justify the grade.

They are making comments that justify their judgment. That's why in a writing department it's so nice not to have that thing so you're not tempted to do judgmental responses.

LF: But what sort of evaluation do you do? Do you have a sense of "Well this is pretty good?"

JR: My sense of judgment is "how close to finish" the piece of work is. How close to being realized. Some very interesting work is so misshapen--Moby Dick should have been thrown out. It's a wonderful book, but it's a huge crude thing. All of these aesthetic rationalizations are silly. And some mistakes are so wonderful that they were better left. He did as much as he could. He fixed it as much as he could, but what he accomplished even with all the errors, is better than a lot of the best polished stuff we have and so there's that to think about too.

LF: Do you think your sense of writing and working so much with stories gives you more skill with that than somebody who doesn't write?

JR: You can be a good editor without being a writer. My editor is also a writer. She's a superb editor. The problem about not being a writer and teaching writing is that you have unrealistic expectations of your students. When I was in the Creative Writing department, some of the kids were taking three different courses in the writing department. They were Writing majors. They were expected to write a novel, half a dozen short stories, and two plays in one year. I'd say, "Have you ever been able to do that?" It's my experience that the more I know the easier it is not the more difficult. The other thing they don't reckon if they're not writing themselves is that sometimes it is necessary to be awkward, to let new experience, new vocabulary in. All through this training people are setting an expectation that the writing is going to improve every year. Well, if their writing improves every year, it means that they're not going to do anything new. If you take a freshman in college and if his style doesn't entirely fall apart before the end of the year, you haven't got a bright student. He's getting all kinds of new vocabulary out of his psych course, out of his economics course. He wants it, but he's introducing all this stuff into his style and it's a mess. I mean it's spastic, it's unclear, it's terrible.

LF: But he's pushing limits.

JR: Yes, and that's what he's got to do and you've got to congratulate him on it without telling him it's good. You can say, "you know you're getting a lot and hang on to it and keep using it and by next year you'll be managing a lot better." Instead they drive kids back to their high school style because that's the only thing they get good marks in or push them into plagiarism where they go to the books. It's just this fundamental thing that people don't know about language and that it goes on all your life. That we don't experience it as much as we get older is that sorrow of being more limited human beings, because we aren't as constantly tested and we aren't as constantly nourished. It's these things that non-writers don't know and therefore do exactly the wrong thing with students, not just in writing departments, but in all the fields. They shove kids into paraphrasing from books.

LF: Not out of intent but out of not knowing.

JR: Yes.

LF: Can you think of a way of handling grading that might be satisfactory?

JR: It certainly was no problem in the writing department. We simply didn't grade until the end of the year. There was a set standard that if you had done the work that was a minimum, then you passed. Beyond that you could give better grades, but a student could expect to pass a course if he or she had written a number of stories or poems. Then beyond that you talked to the student.

LF: So you negotiate grades with the students?

JR: Yes, and I don't take it very seriously. I had one student who wrote about twice the number of stories that were required. He was enjoying class and his comments about other people's work, and a delight and inspiration to the other kids. It was wonderful to see this energy and mind and material that was just blowing out of him. He did publish a story or two before the year was out, and I gave him 150 out of 150. He totally went beyond expectations. The Head of the Department knocked it down to 145 and said, "You're not going to like this." I said, "It means so little either to me or the student I couldn't care less." "Well," he said, "the Dean had challenged it. You can't be perfect in writing." I said, "Fine. It won't mean a thing to him. He couldn't care less. I think it stinks, and I'm not about to try to reform it. But I do feel sorry for you that you're back there."

LF: Yes, I wish there was some way to sort of teach students a comfort with that.

JR: It's very hard to when scholarships depend on it, and their own sense of image depends on it. You take that away from kids and they're pretty lost. A lot of kids are grade oriented and don't feel that they've gotten what they want unless you do grade. It's hard for students whatever you do. Part of the process of teaching them to write is that internalizing of their value systems that's necessary for them as writers. That's the thing you're working on at all levels.

LF: You could have half the assignments that aren't "graded" but are discussed and commented on. To come up with a grade you could grade three pieces out of ten for someone who wants a grade.

JR: Students will want to say, "Is this any good? What do you think?" I really have to just take them right back from that and say "You mean is it to my personal taste? Is it publishable? Or do you mean is it worth anything to you? What are you asking here? What are you asking that you can't answer for yourself? And how do you know I could answer even if the question was mine?" A lot of the time you say, "Take it back from me. Was it worth writing? And why was it worth writing?"

LF: And if it was, that's your answer. How do you deal with plagiarism or do you?

JR: I have done various things. It doesn't come up much in creative writing. It hasn't for me because most of the people are in there because they want to be. It comes up much more often in compulsory courses. I usually am pretty fiercely moral about it because it is for me a kind of stealing that is much more offensive to me than if somebody helps themselves to a candy bar or money out of my purse. I talk about that, but I also want to know why the student has done it. I had a native Indian in one of my classes who was a perfectly competent student, an A student. He didn't turn up for about a month and when he came back, he came back with one of the stupid plagiarizings. I think he took it out of the introduction to the textbook. Something that was really so obvious, almost as if it was a cry for help because he couldn't imagine that I wouldn't have read the Introduction to the text we were using. So I called him and said, "You've done this piece. I don't know why I come across to you like that. Nothing I have said or done requires you to be insulting and that's what you're doing to me. And I want to know why? And it ain't because you're an Indian." It turned out that his old mother was ill. He'd gone to be with her and he didn't think that white people understood that. Often plagiarizing is a cry for help.

I can understand plagiarism because in other cases you're not being asked to develop an authentic voice. It's only in English departments that these people have these weird moral ideas. It's confusing to the kid. I mean the teachers are plagiarizing.

LF: How dc you deal with bad writing, boring, weak, badly written? Do you simply carry on and let them read it and it comes out when they hear it read aloud?

JR: Not everyone has that kind of critical perception. One of the things is that that isn't an objective judgment. I can't read certain writers. They bore me out of my mind. I can not push myself beyond page five and for me it's just unutterably boring. Other people obviously don't think so or they wouldn't be published. This sense that we can judge writing is phony. My job is to get a student using a voice of her own as well as she can. I think, "here I've got a very pompous kid; why am I trying? I ought to teach you how to be pompous in a more interesting way." Because that's what he wants to do. He wants to impress people. Let's work at this same need and make it a little subtler. There's a kind of tinkering that we talk about as objective which really is not. Try reading Lord Jim. I'm so bored by the beginning of Lord Jim. By the time I'm finished it, I'm full of wonder. I'm amazed at the book. But it takes a lot of good slogging to begin and you can't get at it any other way. I say to the students, "I had a hell of a time getting into this book, and I can't promise that all of you will feel the way I did at the end, but I can promise you that a number of you will. You'll feel as if you've learned about yourself and other people." If we're willing to deal in literature with that, then why lose faith in a student's writing.

LF: It does stem back to the impatience with imperfection, and not a comfort with a process. I still wonder where you learn that acceptance? How can you teach baby teachers that?

JR: It was the one thing I did teach them. And that's why I felt a little guilty because they were going out as if they were Henry James. The world takes care of that. A little self-confidence doesn't hurt anyone as long as it doesn't last very long.

LF: But still that's a much more positive thing than a kind of breaking down. For someone's confidence to be built is a lifelong tool.

JR: Absolutely. It seems to me very male oriented too. I felt this way at UBC, that "By god you've got to learn to measure up, you've got to learn to take the tough stuff. You're going to get pounded by the critics." I said to a colleague, "Robert, when have you been pounded by the critics?" "Well, I've had a couple of bad reviews." I said, "Yes, twenty years after you started writing." You have to teach them to deal with this silence and indifference. All this "Toughen them up for all of this stuff, let's see if we can kill their confidence" is stupid.

LF: What about frustrations in teaching creative writing?

JR: The system was the only thing that frustrated me. I was spoiled as a young teacher being allowed to hold my own course. A very exciting part of teaching is to decide what you're going to teach kids about the Old Testament. And to try to remember how I felt at their age and to try to figure out how to deal with some of those basic difficulties. To make it magic. It was a private school. The kids had plenty of money. To go from that to UBC freshman English was pretty awful, to be teaching texts that you really didn't have the kind of enthusiasm for that you'd have if you'd chosen them yourself. The course was designed by a committee so it didn't have any kind of shape. It's interesting to have taken a course with somebody who's really thought about it. The writing course is the same way. Half the people in the beginning course make the students write something in every form, which I just think is dumb. I say, "If you don't want to write a play, write two pages of dialogue and spend your real time on forms that you want to work on. You have to do it, that's a requirement of the course. But you don't have to sweat out five weeks on a play." The rest of the faculty are doing the best they can. These graduate students would come to me because I was the only woman in the department and only there taking the place of the senior fiction writer. They'd come in and say, "Well his response to this story was 'the man isn't strong enough. What you need to do is get a good lay. How about me?'" I would get mad at the young women too. I'd say to them, "You're a grown-up person and you don't need to take--" But that goes on all the time. That was the level of criticism they were getting. Women will write what you want them to write nine-tenths of the time.

LF: You have to teach them not to.

JR: Yes, you have to teach them that they're writing for themselves not for you. You care about the students and they're in the system, so you try to help them deal with it.

LF: In what ways do you think writing can be taught?

JR: It's like tennis and the piano. You learn it practising. A teacher can be there occasionally to say, "Change your grip, try this kind of fingering."

LF: A coach in some ways?

JR: Yes. And to be sure you put in the required number of hours a day, because that really is what it's about. You get better when you do it more.

LF: Are there differences between the way you were taught writing yourself and the way you teach writing?

JR: It's precisely this non-critical listening. I don't remember anything that I learned from a writing class. But I was grateful because they gave me permission to write.

LF: People seem to need that initially to feel it is okay to write?

JR: Particularly if the world is pressing you all the time. In college, there are enormous expectations on you as a scholar; if there weren't writing courses you would never write. The more your critical facility is developed and your writing facility is not, that gap is destructive.

LF: If you can, as a teacher, provide enough encouragement so a student can write their way through that?

JR: And say, "This is a perfectly respectable thing to do." It's not a little hobby. It's part of the official sanctioned program.

LF: Do you think anybody can teach writing?

JR: I don't think it takes a particular set of requirements and trainings. I've seen teachers teaching badly. It's very scary. It's the basic failure of the school system. I wish there were more people like me teaching teachers. Helen and I taught the teachers as we taught the students, and turned out a team of university teachers who were tops.

LF: More than anything, the teaching of writing requires a caring attitude about the writing?

JR: Yes.

LF: Do you think teachers who don't write themselves have a kind of handicap?

JR: Umhm. [affirmative]

LF: Your advice to them?

JR: Write.

LF: Even keeping a journal or something?

JR: I've never been a journal keeper. I talked a lot with teachers who were using journals and got ideas from them about free space in the journal and exercise stuff, and did it right along with them. It was a humbling experience. I've never kept a journal since. It's not my method, but students really enjoyed it and felt that it primed the pump for their more public work.

LF: To what extent do you think that your being a published writer influences your teaching?

JR: It influences the students.

LF: Because you have more credibility or because they want to meet the famous author?

JR: Both. Or they want me to help them. Whenever you're teaching writing you're running into the psychiatric realm.

LF: Things inevitably come up?

JR: Yes, and they have to learn to handle them. The thing you have to know about that is not to abuse it. And not to abuse their sense of your enormous power.

LF: You need to be careful where they aren't.

JR: Yes.

LF: Do you think there are qualities of teachers and writers that overlap?

JR: Certainly being articulate helps. If you're doing a lot of writing, it helps you be quicker. The kind of teaching I do now is total concentration and requires an ability to form impressions adequately and clearly. Certainly those skills overlap. Also the attitude toward people that you develop because you're a teacher is very close to the attitude you have to characters. I'm fascinated when I deal in public with writers who haven't been teachers. They're much more caustic with their audiences. They are much quicker to take offence.

LF: Why do you teach?

JR: I like to be in touch with people. I'm not really interested in social living, I'd rather be quieter. When we go to a city for a week it's very much more interesting to work than it is to go to a cocktail party. You're not in a circumstance where you get to know anybody. If there is wine and cheese after a workshop or a lecture, you've already given people something to talk about. You've raised issues so they can come up and it's simply a context where a more interesting connection goes on. You find out more about people when you're working with them. After a week I probably know things about the people I'm working with that many of their good friends have no idea about. I find it very nourishing.

I don't mind doing the social stuff, but I'm sometimes appalled to think that there are people who live this way all the time because they don't have any way easily to move in to what they care about. It seems so wonderful to have that kind of skill so that you can create that kind of circumstance where you meet people at the level where they care most.

Some of the encounters can get fairly rough. You can get angry people and troubled people. It's not always easy. You can get people who are very rough with each other. You can have a class where even the ones you like are horrible. But most of the time--I'm interested in a range of people. Writing is a craft in which we all share an interest. The content that people are bringing is so interesting.

LF: Have you changed your teaching at all over the years?

JR: I do a lot more listening.

LF: Do you have a metaphor of yourself as a teacher?

JR: If I have a metaphor, it's one of those lead-bottomed toys. You can punch it, and it bounces right back up which is why teaching and writing don't go together very well on the same day. Because the students really ought to be able to throw anything at me that they need to throw, and not have me take it personally even when they mean it to be personal. I might go down, but I'll come right back up again and they know that and that's safe. You can't operate with that persona when you're writing. You have to have no defenses at all. You have to let it hurt and let it show. That's why I taught every other year full time and wrote every other year full time. A part-time teaching job, it can take up the whole day. You don't quit, but you run out of time. You can always do more for your students. After you've been locked up for 16 months with a book, you're so glad to have somebody to talk to that you're delighted to come back out in the world. By the time you've taught for eight months you're longing for the silence of your desk. It was a good balance for me. I like to teach. I do not like to do publicity. It's very phony, degrading.

LF: Do you think writing teachers have a certain place or certain job that society counts on?

JR: I don't think our culture has any sense of what that value is. We're subversives. We're teaching our students precisely what the rest of the system is trying not to teach them. That is that they do have a voice; the language does belong to them, and they have a right to use it.

LF: What about advice to teachers of writing in the school system?

JR: Give the students language. Don't take it away from them. And listen.

LF: What about the preparation of writing teachers?

JR: Keep them writing a lot. It teaches them about craft, about grammar. These are things that come up in school. To show them ways of making rather than breaking. The judgmental part of language is so social. That's where you have to get at it, that defensiveness. Can you imagine teaching mathematics by putting up ten problems on the board, nine of which were wrong. They're still doing that in English classes. It imprints errors on people's minds. English teachers who start out as good spellers end up terrible spellers because they keep getting wrong reinforcement from their students' misspellings. If you're eye-trained, you finally after twenty years don't know how many p's there are in apple. It's negative teaching in language to say, "This is wrong. Why is it wrong?" Don't decide what's wrong with them. Say, "This is how you make a sentence, now make a bunch of them."

LF: Do you want to say anything else about the teaching of writing?

JR: Only that a great deal more of it should be done. This is the great difficulty in schools with the size of classes. We have two problems: one is the size of the classes makes it almost impossible for teachers to be able to handle the amount of stuff that the students need to do. Instead of solving it by saying "People learn to write by reading," you have to figure out a method of getting the kids to write a lot that doesn't overburden you with marking. You can have some sort of assignment that simply comes in and the kids simply know that "There, it's done." Certain kind of jobs of writing you actually mark. But the rest of the stuff is just there.

LF: To get beyond the notion that you have to grade everything the kid does, have control over it?

JR: That's right. So that children are writing as much as they should write. The other is to really beat out of your head the jargon of teaching language. Just never do it. Do not ever use a red pencil, so a kid comes away with his text bleeding to death. Correct only in the sense of helping, only in the sense of encouraging. Don't give any negative examples about anything.

All the teaching should be focused on letting the child develop his own voice, his own awareness of his own process. We stress errors to the detriment of a person being able to use the language to say what they mean. And the way kids are trained to write essays: "I am going to write this paper and now I am writing it and this is what I have written." Honestly [shakes head].

LP: Thanks very much.

JR: I enjoyed it. I like talking about the things that interest me.

Chapter 7 - Summary and Implications

That writing is a vital human activity has been clearly established by the elders of the tribe who are presented in the previous five chapters. But what does this fact mean then to the teacher of writing who approaches the twenty-first century with his or her students? What theories about writing can be translated into useful educational practice? This last chapter addresses these questions by summarizing what the writers say about their writing and teaching processes and by drawing implications for classroom practice.

The Writing Process Summarized

From what these five authors and others have said and written, there appears to be a number of common phases of any major writing project. Those phases have been described by various people: for example, Donald Murray (1976) discusses prewriting, writing, and rewriting (or more recently, prevision, vision, and revision), while Anthony Adams (in Oster, 1979), drawing on the research of Michael Benton, identifies the stages of the composing process as preparation, incubation, illumination, and resolution. For the convenience of this study the phases considered are: creative thinking, first drafting, reading the draft, redrafting, and editing for finished copy. (The questions in the study were arranged in that order.)

While these stages have been listed and may seem to be largely a linear, chronological process, it is important to remember that writing is a recursive process (Britton, 1975) and there is a frequent going over the same stage several times while advancing a little more with each circle back.

With regard to thinking and creativity, often there is a long period of incubation, although all writers interviewed have a strong personal discipline of writing at a regular time. There is no waiting for the literary muse to enlighten and strike the mind with brilliant ideas in a flash of peak experience. There appears to be a persistent, sensitive alertness to the world. An image of a leaf, a theme of living alone, or a vision of prairie women sailing away with a sheet from the clothesline are stored in the mind to develop until there is a conscious readiness and interest in writing about it. All these writers mentioned the fact that they have a strong ear and memory for the way people talk.

Mildon, van Herk, and Rule have journals or notebooks where snippets of ideas, phrases, titles, themes, and characters are recorded in a somewhat abbreviated form while waiting in line, dining out, holidaying, doing the laundry, or before retiring at night. These notes and records are embellished and "played with" or worked at, often for years, before they manifest themselves on a printed page. Mildon states an average of five years time for the full creative process to take effect. There was five years between The Tent Peg and No Fixed Address for van Herk, and although this does not automatically imply that only incubation occured during that period, writing does take time, especially for major works to emerge at a natural pace. In fact, each of the writers has a substantial gap of time between major projects.

Rule keeps notes about current projects and talks about needing time to herself, without demands of the world, for her writing to evolve. She does not teach and write at the same time, and for some time alternated one year writing, the next year teaching. Valgardson finds teaching creative writing all day saps his desire for word-craft at night and weekends. Wiebe writes much less during the teaching year as well. Although van Herk is strict about maintaining a daily writing schedule, marking papers and preparing lectures certainly cuts into that writing time. It is difficult for all these writers to get blocks of uninterrupted writing time. It is no wonder that they are accused often by those who know them well, of continually writing in their heads. Symphonies, housework, and mountain hiking are all ways for these writers to use their "personal drift time" to advance plot and flesh out context and subtext in their writing projects, both present and future. The need for "incubation" in writing is real.

The ideas and concerns built in the mind, evoked from memory, experience, and imagination are translated onto the page in silence as well. For these five writers, physical aloneness, space, and time are absolutely critical for writing well, with the possible exception of Valgardson who has trained himself to write in places such as the laundromat. But even in a situation like that with surrounding "white noise," there is a sense of isolation because one isn't required to communicate verbally with another human being. First drafts are either typed on a typewriter or into a word processor, with little thought to who may read it. Some freewrite the initial text, allowing any and all accompanying thoughts to find their way onto the page, along with intended passages; others write more formally, mentally editing diction and content before recording it on paper, but all report discovery occurring frequently during writing. Ideas and images come to fruition unbidden and current works mushroom into further projects. Writing suggests more writing, and a rhythm develops in daily writing that becomes essential. Each writer talks of the necessity of writing and reports dissatisfaction and persistence: "I tried to give up writing once for about six months and decided that even if nobody ever read what I wrote, I would still do it" (Rule); or "It's a compulsion for me that I have to do it" (van Herk); or "It's an addiction that leaves withdrawal symptoms if too many days go by without writing" (Mildon); or "I drop into a very light hypnotic state." (Valgardson).

The physical act of putting thought onto paper, whether or not it is to be read, is important to these people as a way of making sense, as a way to express rage, as an entertainment of play with words, as a way of finding out what they think, as a centering, meditative activity, as an essentially valid struggle--often the only one they deem valuable enough to spend their non-renewable life minutes doing. Although van Herk suggested that there was an underlying, deep rage that accompanied her drive to write, and indicated it was "a terrible way to make one's living" most expressed a strong sense of contentment, euphoria, epiphany, light hypnotic state, discovery, or pleasure, when the writing was "going well."

Once the words are out on paper, these authors read what they have written, or someone else reads aloud to them what they have written. After they have done the initial writing, they report needing to see or hear the words. Even though most of them use a computer now, they print out a hard copy and all subsequent drafts to make corrections and notes in pen or pencil on the paper, and then return to the word processor to make changes, addition, deletions, and substitutions to their text-in-progress.

Rule and Mildon explain that hearing the words read back aloud allows them to identify "troubled passages" that need fixing. Wherever their reliable readers falter, there is usually an awkward patch of prose. Van Herk and Valgardson read the work themselves and spot errors visually, but it is interesting to note that if they locate a section they are not pleased with, they too will read it aloud, to themselves, to "hear how it sounds." Once the rough places are identified and revisions are made, there are several sets of drafts that these writers go through. One sequence of revisions may be devoted to motivational details for each character. Another draft may be to look for chronological accuracy. A third draft may be to watch for consistent point of view. Another may be to weave in missing background information, and still another may be to cut and substitute, to make the prose as clean and precise as possible. Other scenes, conflicts, and unexpected dialogue occur, are developed, and inserted as well, in revision. The difference between beginning writers and these professional writers is that the seasoned writers will often revise writing twenty or thirty or forty times before they are satisfied that they have "gotten it right," that is, done everything they know how, to make a finished copy that is acceptable to them. (That kind of commitment and work in going over and over a piece of writing again illustrates the necessarily recursive aspect of the composition process.) Often the last revisions are connected to style and consideration for audience.

Articles for periodicals or papers to be presented at conferences are more carefully considered in light of their audience than large works of fiction such as novels. In the case of long prose, the respondents describe the ideal reader either as an internal audience such as "myself in five years" or a combination of "Einstein and Virginia Woolf." The other ideal reader that these writers have is a professional editor whom they trust to catch those errors and problems they miss themselves. The editor's suggestions are carefully considered and further adjustments are made in preparation of the finished manuscript, which is then sent off for publication.

When asked how they know a piece of writing is "finished," the writers stated such things as, "It is never finished, only abandoned" [the reference source of that adage ranged from W.H. Auden to Audrey Thomas]. There was usually nervous laughter at this question and references were made to missing the manuscript and to having feelings of depression, anxiety, and reluctance to have it judged or "allowed out into the world too soon." Mildon spoke of a "too-much-cotton-candy-at-the-fair" sensation, knowing she had done everything she could, when she is ready to release a piece of writing. When Van Herk was asked how she knew when a work was finished, she reported, "When I've done as much as I can to it." After the post-partum grief and relief, there often is a pause between projects, at least with major writing works. Generally the writers reported working on pieces one after another, rather than doing simultaneous projects, unless they were small and unrelated kinds of writing projects such as articles or papers for conferences. Even between large projects, the daily writing carried on sometimes informally, and soon another idea manifested itself for construction.

The Teaching Process Summarized

Because the five interviewed authors also teach, they have a strong sense of what parts of their professional writing practice are important to include in the education of young writers. They were themselves once student writers, learning conscious competence and then unconscious competence with written language. Five common denominators of writing pedagogy emerged in the conversations: establishing a setting and context for writing by students, getting them ready to write and providing "craft" information, having them do the writing, sharing students' writing through oral or silent reading, and nurturing student autonomy and responsibility for their words.

These five elements of a writing class were evident in each author's classroom, although the setting and the kind of student varied. Van Herk and Wiebe accept students through a portfolio system in their creative writing courses, whereas in the situations where Valgardson, Rule and Mildon are concerned, students are accepted largely on a "first come, first served" basis, provided that minimum pre-requisites are met. It should be noted that Mildon was teaching an introductory creative writing course at a college level, whereas the others were teaching at the university level or in public workshop settings.

To establish an atmosphere conducive to producing good written work, the preparation of both teacher and student is essential. In order to be prepared to teach writing, responsible teachers need to be familiar on a personal level with the act of writing, need to be aware of what is currently being written in their province, country, and world, and need to keep up to date with periodicals and texts about writing and teaching writing. That current and background information is then "at the ready" to prepare students for interesting work, and to move them along on an individual basis at any point where it might be required.

To prepare the student to write, a classroom environment of safety and freedom must be established. Mildon, Wiebe, van Herk, and Valgardson mention the importance of confidentiality of writing classes, and Mildon and Rule explain to their students that they want to hear about what works in other people's writing, and what readers remember specifically. All stressed an early statement of standards of a professional atmosphere where the writing is dealt with responsibly by all the other readers in the class with the intent to improve their texts and help those learning writers get closer and closer to what it is that they want to say.

In actually getting the students writing, after the environment is set up, Mildon has a number of small writing exercises such as freewriting or a pre-set description topic, whereas Wiebe, Valgardson, Rule, and van Herk have the students bring work to the class for individual reading and study. Methods of conducting the class, expectations in terms of assignments, deadlines, requirements of attendance and participation are all clearly stipulated at the beginning of each course.

Within each class, when papers by students were examined as a group, opportunities arose for specific teaching topics such as point of view, irony, symbolism, plot structure, and characterization techniques. Further assignments also were extrapolated from these class discussions.

Rule and Mildon explain the importance of oral presentation of the writings during class. Rule has the students read their own papers "because they have the best sense of nuance" and because they ought to assume oral ownership for their words. Mildon reads each paper aloud "because not all students are equally good readers and speakers and may actually distract others from the text by their reading." Van Herk, Wiebe, and Valgardson do not have stories read aloud in class. Rather, they send copies home with students to read, make comments on, and prepare questions about before the next class discussion. In all cases, the main text for writing courses is the students' own work, with accompanying anthologies of local and international master writers to use as examples. According to these authors if one wants to learn about characterization, one ought to read authors such as Maragaret Laurence, Nadine Gordimer, or William Faulkner. In these writing classes, the students learn a comfort in commenting about the stories of others and a comfort in knowing that their own work will receive a sensitive, attentive reading from 15-25 other serious writers.

Another aspect of a writing classroom conducted by a professional author seems to be regular instruction toward personal writing autonomy, teaching students how to read critically and become their own reliable editor by dealing extensively throughout the course with the revision process, paralleling their own professional practice of multiple "rewrites." Frequently in the interviews, comments were made about bringing the students more quickly through the five-to-ten-year average apprenticeship for professional writers, and helping them to learn to write on their own.

Because the students know that their work will be read carefully by their peers as well as by the teacher, they seem to have an increased sense of responsibility about what they write and the correct presentation of those words so that they are not misunderstood. With such immediate feedback they find out directly what parts of their writing are well received and what parts need more work. With the knowledge that they are really receiving attention and they alone are responsible for the production of each document, what students write and how they write it takes on great importance. They almost unconsciously learn grammar and spelling in their effort to make the best writing they can. By the time they leave such a classroom they can produce a good volume of writing in a short time and are willing to modify and adapt their writing skills to all kinds of social, functional, and artistic situations.

Implications from the Study

For anyone to write in a serious way in or out of the classroom setting, the preceding information offers a number of implications. Silence, time, discipline, careful attention to detail, a state of alertness, a notebook, a good familiarity with the language, willingness to struggle and revise, to read and rewrite yet again are fundamental to a competent, successful writer. The concomitant rewards of writing in a serious way include authentic struggle toward meaning, power to say what you mean, development of observational and thinking skills, an awareness of audience, and increased sensitivity to language.

Each author expressed clearly the need for teachers of writing to engage actively in this extended writing process on a regular basis, both so they understand writing "from the inside" and so they know what they are really demanding of their students and can more readily assist them during any phase of writing.

To foster the early parts of the process, teachers could allow more lead time by giving the topic early, so that "incubation" time would be more adequate. If that lead time were planned for, in conjunction with "spiderwebbing" and freewriting, for example, the process would match more closely to what writers actually do. To accommodate the natural prewriting phase, teachers can allow some silence and thought-time in the classroom, and can plan actual writing time to validate that process as an important, useful, and effective human activity.

In order to assist students in learning how to revise, ~~it~~ may be instructive to hold writing classes in the computer rooms of the schools to encourage freewriting, to obtain immediate clean copies of their writing, and to revise drafts quickly. The English room could be used for prewriting activities, for silent or oral reading of their own texts and for discussion about the work they have produced. Classroom time for revision is necessary to deal with problems of mechanics, organization, sentence structure, diction, and content, while the teacher can provide immediate time and expertise to deal with individual concerns in a writing workshop forum. The fact that students work at different rates becomes a real advantage in this situation. The effectiveness of writers' workshops is considerable because at this point they can learn about personal errors and correct them without having to attend to lecture time regarding things they already know.

The five authors here are all adamant that the only way to improve one's writing is by writing. If we desire better writers in our society, then they must write often and regularly. If the teacher is also personally writing regularly, the students will know that they are apprenticing with a master of the craft, or at least a journeyman, and will be more willing to take suggestions and share writing. The teacher becomes reader, both aurally and visually, using the stance "teacher-as-trusted-adult" rather than "teacher-as-examiner" (Britton, 1976). The teacher also becomes the editor that Mildon, Valgardson, van Herk, and Rule describe. Then the student-teacher relationship is analogous to the writer-editor roles in a "real" writing situation. All teaching of language usage and literary device and elements is done via student-produced text in a writing class rather than through the more traditional lecture-and-exercise format. This procedure is more comfortably accommodated if the teachers themselves are active writers, frequently involved in all aspects of the process.

While the five authors were in agreement on many aspects of teaching writing it may be of particular interest to writing teachers that there was also a lack of consensus about certain pedagogical techniques. The lack of agreement indicates that there is considerable latitude for personal style and that a variety of methods can be effective.

One point of strong disagreement emerged over whether or not teachers should write in the classroom along with their students, or even whether or not students should be writing in the classroom at all. At the post-secondary level Wiebe and van Herk were critical of that practice saying it was a waste of time. (They did recognize, however, that in the school system children should be writing in class.) Mildon, on the other hand, did some freewriting with her students when they were trying freewriting as one method of generating writing. Teacher-as-writing-colleague is a major departure from the old image of language teacher pacing up and down the rows "supervising work." Perhaps writing with one's students may further validate the process.

Another area of difference among the five teachers involved the mode of reading students' work. As mentioned above, Mildon and Rule found oral presentation of the work crucial, whereas van Herk, Valgardson, and Wiebe did not. It is interesting to note, however, that if a passage is not working they read that small portion aloud to "hear how it sounds" and then make revisions.

A further noticeable contrast was evident in what could be called "attitude toward writing," with Mildon and Rule being firm about establishing a gentle, nurturing, and positive focus in their classes, whereas Van Herk and Wiebe mentioned rigorous standards and a tough, disciplined approach to writing. Valgardson thought the description of him as a "mean son-of-a-bitch" was a fair assessment, but he admitted to passing out kleenex and listening to personal problems of his creative writing students. He mentioned that he has stringent standards, but he, van Herk, and Wiebe all say they have become less strict over the years. The general tone of Mildon and Rule's comments indicates that they have a more nurturing approach than the other three authors; however, perhaps Mildon's and Rule's intention to "give the students' voices back to them" was offered in a slightly different context (that of workshops and college) than those of van Herk, Valgardson, and Wiebe, all of whom teach at the university level, where there is an expectation that the students are there to produce literature. Perhaps the Mildon/Rule approach is more appropriate for the school system as well, and then as students progress over the term, one could become more rigourous in expectations. It may be useful to develop a thoughtful, eclectic approach which utilizes the procedures suggested by all five authors. For example, one could "support and illuminate" (Rule and Mildon) early in teaching writing, "coach" (Valgardson, Wiebe) in the middle phases, and finally "Panzer tank" the writing (van Herk) in order to get the most polished piece of writing possible. This sequence of approaches could be carried out over the span of an English course with one's students. Van Herk explains that she concentrates on "precision" in students' writing the first year, structure in the next year, and then finally, experimentation. That may be a useful consideration in planning curricula for junior and senior high school English courses.

If students' teachers are writing themselves and are members of writing organizations, guilds, and teaching associations, they have ready access to information about wider reading audiences, including possibilities for student publication, should they so desire. A sense of being part of a larger body of writing people is available to both them and their students. This sense of community allows for heightened interest and helps to validate cooperation in the act of writing.

Looking at what "real authors" do in their writing is exciting for teachers and students alike. It can help to transform opinions and practice in that part of our learning that has become even more vital in a chaotic, alienating world that needs more personal involvement, life-affirming skills, and artistic creation. Writing is one way, and should be actively fostered from an early period in each child's life, as an integral part of each year of education, well into adulthood.

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Appendix A - Questions About Writing

During this first conversation, I would like to use our time together to talk about you as a writing human being and what you think about the topic of writing in some specific ways, and then in our second session, to focus on you as a teacher of writing.

1. As a way of beginning to talk about writing, I wonder if you would explain a little about how long you have been writing and when you first knew that writing was more than something you did at school or did as a hobby?

2. When you realized that you were going to write, what plans or alterations did you make to your life?

3. Who encouraged you to write, early in your experiences as beginning writer? What "reward" was there when you began to write? Has the "reward" changed; that is, what pleasures or needs are met by your writing?

4. Can you describe those parts of your formal education (school experience, classes, systematic instruction) that you feel contributed to those things you needed to know to write?

5. Did you ever take writing courses yourself? What importance did your experiences as a writing student have on your work?

6. Are there any informal kinds of education that contributed to the way you write now?

7. In what ways has your writing changed over the years? Do you have a "most comfortable genre"?

8. Do you have a mentor or reader now, someone with whom you can easily share your writing before it reaches finished manuscript form? (Do you want one?)

9. What organizations do you belong to or periodicals do you subscribe to that are directly related to your writing in some way? In what ways are they helpful to you?

10. Let's talk a little while about the process itself. What leads into a writing project? Where do your ideas come from?

11. How do you initially record those ideas, in other words get the thinking into words, transfer from mind to page?

12. Do these initial stages, this pre-writing if you will, change depending on the project or genre?

13. What materials or tools of the trade do you require while you write?

14. What physical environment do you create for yourself before you write? Do you have a ritual or habit when you write--a certain outfit of clothes, a time of day, a particular mood, for example?

15. How much privacy do you require for your writing? Is that a problem for you in any way? Do people around you understand that and respect it?

16. How often do you write? What sort of discipline do your exert on yourself for your writing?

17. What things compete or interfere with your writing and how many of them are within your control?

18. Is writing a kind of positive addiction for you? I mean does a kind of pressure build up internally that can only be adequately released through writing?

19. Are you conscious of moving from pre-writing to writing stages of your work?

20. Would you talk about your own actual process of writing? How do you write, once you have an idea?

21. Can you describe your relationship with words, with language?

22. a. Are you ever afraid to write something, worried about the consequences of your writing?

b. Would you say that you have a censor operating when you write? Is that different from "editor"?

c. What sorts of things are you likely to censor?

d. How do you work through those places in your writing and still maintain an authentic voice?)

23. Is there a kind of fine line between ecstasy and terror for you about writing? What keeps you writing; what's the "edge" for you in writing?

24. When do you have audience in mind and how much of a consideration is that for you as you write?

25. Once you have written a first draft, how do you go about re-writing, or revision? Do you have a set plan for each draft you make? (editing mechanical errors, characters, plot accuracy, and so on?)

26. How do you know when a piece of writing is "done", ready for release to a public audience?

27. Do you have other people you rely on in producing a publishable piece of writing?

28. In what ways do you evaluate your own writing?

29. Do you have a work that you would classify as your best published work? Your weakest? (that is, the one you are least satisfied with) Why?

30. Do you ever throw writing away? What are the circumstances? Have you ever regretted throwing something away? Have you made errors or mistakes or had failures that have taught you about writing?

31. Were there any social or political events in your life that influenced your writing?

32. When you about write these days, do you include a social or political intent in a conscious way?

33. What things do you still want to write at this point in your life? Does the writing itself suggest new projects for writing? Do you work on more than one writing project at one time?

34. To what extent does a sense of alienation, pain, struggle, anger, or sensitivity influence your work?

35. If one is loved and/or accepted in an unconditional way, do you think that creates a kind of psychological freedom and safety that is necessary for creativity to occur? Do you have that?

36. Is there an added confidence if one is loved, that allows a writer to take greater risks and push the limits further than one might "on one's own"?

37. To what degree do your own "real life" experiences inform your writing? What kind of autobiography do you

borrow?

Can you think of a specific example from your work?

38. Very often people ask fiction writers if a thing really happened, or how much of a thing is real. What do you think they are tacitly asking? Why are readers concerned about "truthfulness" in fiction?

39, To what extent are you concerned about truthfulness or authenticity in your own writing?

40. Do you have a sense of a "writing voice" ? Is that voice different from other voices that make up your persona?

41. Is there an element of seeing the world in layering contexts for you? Are you aware of constantly inventing and re-inventing metaphors for "the way things are" or the way things could be?

42. Some have indicated that writing is a way of externalizing the world to make better sense or meaning of it, or a way of solving problems. What have you to say about that?

43. What functions and responsibilities do you believe a writer has to his/her society?

44. Are there any other comments you would like to include about writing that we haven't mentioned in our conversation or with which you would like to conclude?

Thank You

Questions About Teaching

During this second interview I would like to use our time together to talk to you about your teaching of writing and to explore some of your ideas about teaching.

1. What kind of teaching experience do you have? What variety of levels and classes have you/do you teach? (Do you have an optimum number of students that you like to have?)

2. How many of your students are/were in your classes as a personal choice? How many in compulsory courses?

3. Do you think there is a difference between the way you teach writing in creative writing classes and the way you teach writing in other classes?

4. a. Would you describe the atmosphere that you attempt to create for the students, and for yourself as teacher?

   b. What efforts do you make at the beginning of a course to establish a kind of psychological safety and freedom for the students?

   c. To what extent do you use student peers as co-teachers, editors, and audience?

   d. Most writers prefer privacy for writing: how do you deal with that issue within the classroom walls?

e. What "rules" do you have in your writing classes?

5. Do you talk about creativity or "inspiration" in class. Do you share your own ideas and methods?

6. Sometimes teachers spend time in classes talking about the writing just before students begin. There is often encouragement to brainstorm in groups, pairs or individually, to talk about what they are going to write. What is your attitude about talking before the writing?

7. What kinds of assignments do you give to the students? What parameters around and requirements for assignments do you set?

8. How much actual writing do you have the students do within the class time? Does that vary for the type of class you have?

9. How much are you involved during a student's writing process? If asked, what sort of help are you prepared to give during the writing?

10. Are you conscious of allowing space and silence for a student to struggle with her/his writing, to try to find better ways of saying what she means on her own?

11. When a student has a first draft, then what?

12. What is the importance to you of reading student work aloud during class?

13. Is there a point at which you talk about audience?

14. a. Do you write in the classroom yourself, with students?

    b. Do you ever share your own writing with students?

15. How much emphasis do you place on revision? How much class time do you allow for that part of the process?

16. a. How do you evaluate student writing? (What is your marking system?)

    b. What is your attitude toward marking and assigning grades to student writing?

    c. Any suggestions for school teachers with regard to "correcting" and evaluating student writing?

17. Do you talk about publishing writing in class? Do you encourage (in a direct way) a student to publish a particular piece?

18. How do you deal with plagiarism?

19. How do you deal with "terrible" writing?

20. What do you do about deadlines and late assignments?

21. To what extent do you collaborate or negotiate with the students about what happens in the class and about assignments?

22. What frustrations do/did you experience in your teaching?

23. In what ways can writing be "taught"?

24. Are there differences between the way you were taught writing and the way you teach writing? Is the way you conduct your own classes based on a particular model or example?

25. a. Can anybody teach writing?

    b. Do you think that teachers who do not write themselves have a handicap when teaching writing?

26. a. To what extent do you think that your being a publishing writer influences your teaching?

    b. What qualities of writer and teacher overlap?

27. Why do you teach?

28. Has your teaching changed over time?

29. Do you have a metaphor of yourself as teacher?

30. What functions and responsibilities do you see the writing teacher as having, both in the classroom

and in society?

31. What advice could you give teachers of writing in the school system?

32. How can we best prepare our writing teachers?

33. Is there anything else about teaching writing that you would like to say in closing?

Thank You.

Appendix B - Correspondence Samples

Edmonton, Alberta
December 1, 1986

Dear Ms. Rule,

For the past five years I have been teaching English at Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton. I edited West of Fiction from NeWest Press (under the name of Flater) with Aritha van Herk and Rudy Wiebe. I am also working at my own writing.

My reason for writing to you involves my Masters' thesis which I am doing at the University of Alberta through the Department of Secondary Education (English). The thesis is an exploration of how publishing writers teach writing.

It is important to me as teacher and writer and human being that we learn what the practising writers of our country and our time have to tell us about writing. Too many of the teachers of writing do not write themselves, and without this intimate experience of making writing, they at least need some shared knowledge from writers.

I will be conversing with six Canadian published writers who also teach or have taught writing. Aritha van Herk has consented to participate as well as Marsha Mildon, poet and playwright from Edmonton. I am concurrently contacting Rudy Wiebe, W.O. Mitchell, and W.D. Valgardson. I would be very pleased if you would consent to be one of the six writers I include.

It is my intent to meet with each writer on two occasions, within a day or two. I am prepared to come to Galiano Island; I would rent a place at Penny's Cottages so that you could come there for our discussions if that is convenient. If you have other suggestions, I am certainly willing to comply. I would like to arrange the two meetings with you for sometime in February, March, or April.

Following the practice of the Paris Review, I will be sending the main questions ahead of time for your consideration. I would expect each session to last no more than two hours and would like your permission to tape our conversations.

I am excited at the prospect of meeting you since I have admired your writing for many years. Your essays in A Hot-Eyed Moderate have raised some important questions for me. I hope you will give my request careful consideration but I do understand the value of time for a writer and do not wish to be intrusive. Thank you.

Yours sincerely,
Leah Fowler

December 1, 1986

Dear Mr. Valgardson,

For the past five years I have been teaching English at Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton. Before that I taught high school biology and English. Before that I did housepainting, postal work, and clerking... In 1983 I edited West of Fiction from NeWest Press (under the name of Flater) with Aritha van Herk and Rudy Wiebe. I am also working at my own writing.

My reason for writing to you involves my Masters' thesis which I am doing at the University of Alberta through the Department of Secondary Education (English). The thesis is an exploration of how publishing writers teach writing.

It is important to me as teacher and writer and human being that we learn what the practising writers of our country and our time have to tell us about writing. Too many of the teachers of writing do not write themselves, and without this intimate experience of making writing, they at least need some shared knowledge from writers.

I will be conversing with six Canadian published writers who also teach or have taught writing. Aritha van Herk has consented to participate as well as Marsha Mildon, poet and playwright from Edmonton. I am concurrently contacting Rudy Wiebe, Jane Rule, and W.O. Mitchell. I would be very pleased if you would consent to be one of the six writers I include. It is important to me and to others who may use this thesis in making adjustments to their methods that your views about teaching and writing be represented.

It is my intent to meet with each writer on two occasions, within a day or two. I am prepared to come to Victoria for our discussions if that is convenient. If you have other suggestions, I am certainly willing to comply. I would like to arrange the two meetings with you for sometime in February, March, or April.

Following the practice of the Paris Review, I will be sending the main questions ahead of time for your consideration. I would expect each session to last no more than two hours and would like your permission to tape our conversations.

I am excited at the prospect of meeting you since I admire your writing a great deal. I have used several of your stories and related films for my own literature and writing classes. I hope you will give my request careful consideration but I do understand the value of time for a writer and do not wish to be intrusive.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,
Leah Fowler